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THE MILLION-DOLLAR SUITCASE

THE MILLION-DOLLAR SUITCASE

BY

ALICE MacGOWAN

AND

PERRY NEWBERRY

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THE MILLION-DOLLAR SUITCASE

UNIV. CALIF.

The Million-Dollar Suitcase

CHAPTER I

WORTH GILBERT

ON the blank silence that followed my last words, there in the big, dignified room with its Circassian walnut and sound-softening rugs, Dykeman, the oldest director, squalled out as though he had been bitten,

"All there is to tell! But it can't be! It isn't possib—" His voice cracked, split on the word, and the rest came in an agonized squeak, "A man can't just vanish into thin air!"

"A man!" Knapp, the cashier, echoed. "A suitcase full of money—our money—can't vanish into thin air in the course of a few hours."

Feverishly they passed the timeworn phrase back and forth; it would have been ludicrous if it hadn't been so deadly serious. Well, money when you come to think of it, is its very existence to such an institution; it was not to be wondered at that the twelve men around the long table in the directors' room of the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank found this a life or death matter.

"How much—?" began heavy-set, heavy-voiced old Anson, down at the lower end, but stuck and got no further. There was a smitten look on every face at the contemplation—a suitcase could hold so unguessably great a sum expressed in terms of cash and securities.

"We'll have the exact amount in a few moments—I've just set them to verifying," President Whipple indicated with a slight backward nod the second and smaller table in the room, where two clerks delved mole-like among piles of securities, among greenbacks and yellowbacks bound round with paper collars, and stacks of coin.

The blinds were down, only the table lamps on, and a gooseneck over where the men counted. It put the place all in shadow, and threw out into bolder relief the faces around that board, gray-white, denatured, all with the financier's curiously unhuman look. The one fairly cheerful countenance in sight was that of A. G. Cummings, the bank's attorney.

For myself, I was only waiting to hear what results those clerks would bring us. So far, Whipple had been quite noncommittal: the extraordinary state of the market—everything so upset that a bank couldn't afford even the suspicion of a loss or irregularity—hinting at something in his mind not evident to the rest of us. I was just rising to go round and ask him quietly if, having reported, I might not be excused to get on the actual work, when the door opened.

I can't say why the young fellow who stood in it should have seemed so foreign to the business in hand; perhaps the carriage of his tall figure, the military abruptness of his movements, the way he swung the door far back against the wall and halted there, looking us over. But I do know that no sooner had Worth Gilbert, lately home from France, crossed the threshold, meeting Whipple's outstretched hand, nodding carelessly to the others, than suddenly every man in the room seemed older, less a man. We were dead ones; he the only live wire in the place.

"Boyne," the president turned quickly to me, "would you mind going over for Captain Gilbert's benefit what you've just said?"

The newcomer had, so far, not made any movement to join the circle at the table. He stood there, chin up, looking straight at us all, but quite through us. At the back of the gaze was a something between weary and fierce that I have noticed in the eyes of so many of our boys home from what they'd witnessed and gone through over there, when forced to bring their attention to the stale, bloodless affairs of civil life. Used to the instant, conclusive fortunes of war, they can hardly handle themselves when matters hitch and halt upon customs and legalities; the only thing that appeals to them is the big chance, win or lose, and have it over. Such a man doesn't speak the language of the group that was there gathered. Just looking at him, old Dykeman rasped, without further provocation,

"What's Captain Gilbert got to do with the private concerns of this bank?"

As though the words—and their tone—had been a cordial invitation, rather than an offensive challenge, the young man, who had still shown no sign of an intention to come into the meeting at all, walked to the table, drew out a chair and sat down.

"Pardon me, Mr. Dykeman," Cummings' voice had a wire edge on it, "the Hanford block of stock in this bank has, as I think you very well know, passed fully into Gilbert hands to-day."

"Thomas A. Gilbert," Dykeman was sparing of words.

"Captain Worth Gilbert's father," Whipple attempted pacification. "Mr. Gilbert senior was with me till nearly noon, closing up the transfer. He had hardly left when we discovered the shortage. After consultation, Knapp and I got hold of Cummings. We wanted to get you gentlemen here—have the capital of the bank represented, as nearly as we could—and found that Mr. Gilbert had taken the twelve-forty-five train for Santa Ysobel; so, as Captain Gilbert was to be found, we felt that if we got him it would be practically—er—quite the same thing—"

Worth Gilbert had sat in the chair he selected, absolutely indifferent. It was only when Dykeman, hanging to his point, spoke again, that I saw a quick gleam of blue fire come into those hawk eyes under the slant brow. He gave a sort of detached attention as Dykeman sputtered indecently.

"Not the same thing at all! Sons can't always speak for fathers, any more than fathers can always speak for sons. In this case—"

He broke off with his ugly old mouth open. Worth Gilbert, the son of divorced parents, with a childhood that had divided time between a mother in the East and a California father, surveyed the parchment-like countenance leisurely after the crackling old voice was hushed. Finally he grunted inarticulately (I'm sorry I can't find a more imposing word for a returned hero); and answered all objections with,

"I'm here now—and here I stay. What's the excitement?"

"I was just asking Mr. Boyne to tell you," Whipple came in smoothly.

No one else offered any objections. What I repeated, briefly, amounted to this:

Directly after closing time to-day—which was noon, as this was Saturday—Knapp, the cashier of the bank, had discovered a heavy shortage, and it was decided on a quick investigation that Edward Clayte, one of the paying tellers, had walked out with the money in a suitcase. I was immediately called in on what appeared a wide-open trail, with me so close behind Clayte that you'd have said there was nothing to it. I followed him—and the suitcase—to his apartment at the St. Dunstan, found he'd got there at twenty-five minutes to one, and I barely three quarters of an hour after.

"How do you get the exact minute Clayte arrived?" Anson stopped me at this point, "and the positive knowledge that he had the suitcase with him?"

"Clayte asked the time—from the clerk at the desk—as he came in. He put the suitcase down while he set his watch. The clerk saw him pick it up and go into the elevator; Mrs. Griggsby, a woman at work mending carpet on the seventh floor—which is his—saw him come out of the elevator carrying it, and let himself into his room. There the trail ends."

"Ends?" As my voice halted young Gilbert's word came like a bullet. "The trail can't end unless the man was there."

"Or the suitcase," little old Sillsbee quavered, and Worth Gilbert gave him a swift, half-humorous glance.

"Bath and bedroom," I said, "that suite has three windows, seven stories above the ground. I found them all locked—not mere latches—the St. Dunstan has burglar-proof locks. No disturbance in the room; all neat, in place, the door closed with the usual spring lock; and I had to get Mrs. Griggsby to move, since she was tacking the carpet right at the threshold. Everything was in that room that should have been there—except Clayte and the suitcase."

The babel of complaint and suggestion broke out as I finished, exactly as it had done when I got to this point before: "The Griggsby woman ought to be kept under surveillance"; "The clerk, the house servants ought to be watched,"—and so on, and so on. I curtly reiterated my assurance that such routine matters had been promptly and thoroughly attended to. My nerves were getting raw. I'm not so young as I was. This promised to be one of those grinding cases where the detective agency is run through the rollers so many times that it comes out pretty slim in the end, whether that end is failure or success.

The only thing in sight that it didn't make me sick to look at was that silent young fellow sitting there, never opening his trap, giving things a chance to develop, not rushing in on them with the forceps. It was a crazy thing for Whipple to call this meeting—have all these old, scared men on my back before I could take the measure of what I was up against. What, exactly, had the Van Ness Avenue Bank lost? That, and not anything else, was the key for my first moves. And at last a clerk crossed to our table, touched Whipple's arm and presented a sheet of paper.

"I'll read the total, gentlemen." The president stared at the sheet he held, moistened his lips, gulped, gasped, "I—I'd no idea it was so much!" and finished in a changed voice, "nine hundred and eighty seven thousand, two hundred and thirty four dollars."

A deathlike hush. Dykeman's mere look was a call for the ambulance; Anson slumped in his chair; little old Sillsbee sat twisted away so that his face was in shadow, but the knuckles showed bone white where his hand gripped the table top. None of them seemed able to speak; the young voice that broke startlingly on the stillness had the effect of scaring the others, with its tone of nonchalance, rather than reassuring them. Worth Gilbert leaned forward and looked round in my direction with,

"This is beginning to be interesting. What do the police say of it?"

"We've not thought well to notify them yet." Whipple's eye consulted that of his cashier and he broke off. Quietly the clerks got out with the last load of securities; Knapp closed the door carefully behind them, and as he returned to us, Whipple repeated, "I had no idea it was so big," his tone almost pleading as he looked from one to the other. "But I felt from the first that we'd better keep this thing to ourselves. We don't want a run on the bank, and under present financial conditions, almost anything might start one. But—almost a million dollars!"

He seemed unable to go on; none of the other men at the table had anything to offer. It was the silent youngster, the outsider, who spoke again.

"I suppose Clayte was bonded—for what that's worth?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars," Knapp, the cashier, gave the information dully. The sum sounded pitiful beside that which, we were to understand, had traveled out of the bank as currency and unregistered securities in Clayte's suitcase.

"Bonding company will hound him, won't they?" young Gilbert put it bluntly. "Will the Clearing House help you out?" in the tone of one discussing a lost umbrella.

"Not much chance—now." Whipple's face was sickly. "You know as well as I do that we are going to get little help from outside. I want you to all stand by me now—keep this quiet—among ourselves—"

"Among ourselves!" rapped out Kirkpatrick. "Then it leaks—we have a run—and where are you?"

"No, no. Just long enough to give Boyne here a chance to recover our money without publicity—try it out, anyhow."

"Well," said Anson sullenly, "that's what he's paid for. How long is it going to take him?"

I made no attempt to answer that fool question; Cummings spoke for me, lawyer fashion, straddling the question, bringing up the arguments pro and con.

"Your detective asks for publicity to assist his search. You refuse it. Then you've got to be indulgent with him in the matter of time. Understand me, you may be right; I'm not questioning the wisdom of secrecy, though as a lawyer I generally think the sooner you get to the police with a crime the better. You all can see how publicity and a sizable reward offered would give Mr. Boyne a hundred thousand assistants—conscious and unconscious—to help nab Clayte."

"And we'd be a busted bank before you found him," groaned Knapp. "We've got to keep this thing to ourselves. I agree with Whipple."

"It's all we can do," the president repeated.

"Suppose a State bank examiner walks in on you Monday?" demanded the attorney.

"We take that chance—that serious chance," replied Whipple solemnly.

Silence after that again till Cummings spoke.

"Gentlemen, there are here present twelve of the principal stockholders of the bank." He paused a moment to estimate. "The capital is practically represented. Speaking as your legal advisor, I am obliged to say that you should not let the bank take such a risk as Mr. Whipple suggests. You are threatened with a staggering loss, but, after all, a high percent of money lost by defalcations is recovered—made good—wholly or in part."

"Nearly a million dollars!" croaked old Sillsbee.

"Yes, yes, of course," Cummings agreed hastily; "the larger amount's against you. The men who can engineer such a theft are almost as strong as you are. You've got to make every edge cut—use every weapon that's at hand. And most of all, gentlemen, you've got to stand together. No dissensions. As a temporary expedient—to keep the bank sufficiently under cover and still allow Boyne the publicity he needs—replace this money pro rata among yourselves. That wouldn't clean any of you. Announce a small defalcation, such as Clayte's bond would cover, so you could collect there; use all the machinery of the police. Then when Clayte's found, the money recovered, you reimburse yourselves."

"But if he's never found! If it's never recovered?" Knapp asked huskily; he was least able of any man in the room to stand the loss.

"What do you say, Gilbert?" The attorney looked toward the young man, who, all through the discussion, had been staring straight ahead of him. He came round to the lawyer's question like one roused from other thoughts, and agreed shortly.

"Not a bad bet."

"Well—Boyne—" Whipple was giving way an inch at a time.

"It's a peculiar case," I began, then caught myself up with, "All cases are peculiar. The big point here is to get our man before he can get rid of the money. We were close after Clayte; even that locked room in the St. Dunstan needn't have stopped us. If he wasn't in it, he was somewhere not far outside it. He'd had no time to make a real getaway. All I needed to lay hands on him was a good description."

"Description?" echoed Whipple. "Your agency's got descriptions on file—thumb prints—photographs—of every employee of this bank."

"Every one of 'em but Clayte," I said. "When I came to look up the files, there wasn't a thing on him. Don't think I ever laid eyes on the man myself."

A description of Edward Clayte? Every man at the table—even old Sillsbee—sat up and opened his mouth to give one; but Knapp beat them to it, with,

"Clayte's worked in this bank eight years. We all know him. You can get just as many good descriptions as there are people on our payroll or directors in this room—and plenty more at the St. Dunstan, I'll be bound."

"You think so?" I said wearily. "I have not been idle, gentlemen; I have interviewed his associates. Listen to this; it is a composite of the best I've been able to get." I read: "Edward Clayte; height about five feet seven or eight; weight between one hundred and forty and one hundred and fifty pounds; age somewhere around forty; smooth face; medium complexion, fairish; brown hair; light eyes; apparently commonplace features; dressed neatly in blue business suit, black shoes, black derby hat—"

"Wait a minute," interposed Knapp. "Is that what they gave you at the St. Dunstan—what he was wearing when he came in?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'd have said he had on tan shoes and a fedora. He *did*—or was that yesterday? But aside from that, it's a perfect description; brings the man right up before me."

I heard a chuckle from Worth Gilbert.

"That description," I said, "is gibberish; mere words. Would it bring Clayte up before any one who had never seen him? Ask Captain Gilbert, who doesn't know the man. I say that's a list of the points at which he resembles every third office man you meet on the street. What I want is the points at which he'd differ. You have all known Clayte for years; forget his regularities, and tell me his peculiarities—looks, manners, dress or habits."

There was a long pause, broken finally by Whipple.

"He never smoked," said the bank president.

"Occasionally he did," contradicted Knapp, and the pause continued till I asked,

"Any peculiarities of clothing?"

"Oh, yes," said Whipple. "Very neat. Usually blue serge."

"But sometimes gray," added Knapp, heavily, and old Sillsbee piped in,

"I've seen that feller wear pin-check; I know I have."

I was fed up on clothes.

"How did he brush his hair?" I questioned.

"Smoothed down from a part high on the left," Knapp came back promptly.

"On the right," boomed old Anson from the foot of the table.

"Sometimes—yes—I guess he did," Knapp conceded hesitantly.

"Oh, well then, what color was it? Maybe you can agree better on that."

"Sort of mousy color," Knapp thought.

"O Lord! Mousy colored!" groaned Dykeman under his breath. "Listen to 'em!"

"Well, isn't it?" Knapp was a bit stung.

"House mousy, or field mousy?" Cummings wanted to know.

"Knapp's right enough," Whipple said with dignity. "The man's hair is a medium brown—indeterminate brown." He glanced around the table at the heads of hair under the electric lights. "Something the color of Merrill's," and a director began stroking his hair nervously.

"No, no; darker than Merrill's," broke in Kirkpatrick. "Isn't it, Knapp?"

"Why, I was going to say lighter," admitted the cashier, discouragedly.

"Never mind," I sighed. "Forget the hair. Come on—what color are his eyes?"

"Blue," said Whipple.

"Gray," said Knapp.

"Brown," said Kirkpatrick.

They all spoke in one breath. And as I despairingly laid down my pencil, the last man repeated firmly,

"Brown. But—they might be light brown—or hazel, y'know."

"But, after all, Boyne," Whipple appealed to me, "you've got a fairly accurate description of the man, one that fits him all right."

"Does it? Then he's description proof. No moles, scars or visible marks?" I suggested desperately.

"None." There was a negative shaking of heads.

"No mannerisms? No little tricks, such as a twist of the mouth, a mincing step, or a head carried on one side?"

More shakes of negation from the men who knew Clayte.

"Well, at least you can tell me who are his friends—his intimates?"

Nobody answered.

"He must have friends?" I urged.

"He hasn't," maintained Whipple. "Knapp is as close to him as any man in San Francisco."

The cashier squirmed, but said nothing.

"But outside the bank. Who were his associates?"

"Don't think he had any," from Knapp.

"Relatives?"

"None—I know he hadn't."

"Girls? Lord! Didn't he have a girl?"

"Not a girl."

"No associates—no girl? For the love of Mike, what could such a man intend to do with all that money?" I gasped. "Where did he spend his time when he wasn't in the bank?"

Whipple looked at his cashier for an answer. But Knapp was sitting, head down, in a painful brown study, and the president himself began haltingly.

"Why, he was perhaps the one man in the bank that I knew least about. The truth is he was so unobjectionable in every way, personally unobtrusive, quite unimportant and uninteresting; really—er—un-everything, such a—a—"

"Shadow," Cummings suggested.

"That's the word—shadow—I never thought to inquire where he went till he walked out of here this noon with the bank's money crammed in that suitcase."

"Was the Saturday suitcase a regular thing?" I asked, and Whipple looked bewildered. But Knapp woke up with,

"Oh, yes. For years. Studious fellow. Books to be exchanged at the public library, I think. No—" Knapp spoke heavily. "Come to think of it, guess that was special work. He told me once he was taking some sort of correspondence course."

"Special work!" chuckled Worth Gilbert. "I'll tell the world!"

"Oh, well, give me a description of the suitcase," I hurried.

"Brown. Sole-leather. That's all I ever noticed," from Whipple, a bit stiffly.

"Brass rings and lock, I suppose?"

"Brass or nickel; I don't remember. What'd you say, Knapp?"

"I wouldn't know now, if it was canvas and tin," replied the harried cashier.

"Gentlemen," I said, looking across at the clock, "since half-past two my men have been watching docks, ferries, railroad stations, every garage near the St. Dunstan, the main highways out of town. Seven of them on the job, and in the first hour they made ten arrests, on that description; and every time, sure they had their man. They thought, just as you seem to think, that the bunch of words described something. We're getting nowhere, gentlemen, and time means money here."

CHAPTER II

SIGHT UNSEEN

IN the squabble and snatch of argument, given dignity only because it concerned the recovery of near a million dollars, we seemed to have lost Worth Gilbert entirely. He kept his seat, that chair he had taken instantly when old Dykeman seemed to wish to have it denied him; but he sat on it as though it were a lone rock by the sea. I didn't suppose he was hearing what we said any more than he would have heard the mewing of a lot of gulls, when, on a sudden silence, he burst out,

"For heaven's sake, if you men can't decide on anything, sell me the suitcase! I'll buy it, as it is, and clean up the job."

"Sell you—the suitcase—Clayte's suitcase?" They sat up on the edge of their chairs; bewildered, incredulous, hostile. Such a bunch is very like a herd of cattle; anything they don't understand scares them. Even the attorney studied young Gilbert with curious interest. I was mortal glad I hadn't said what was the fact, that with the naming of the enormous sum lost I was certain this was a sizable conspiracy with long-laid plans. They were mistrustful enough as Whipple finally questioned,

"Is this a bona-fide offer, Captain Gilbert?" and Dykeman came in after him.

"A gambler's chance at stolen money—is that what you figure on buying, sir? Is that it?" And heavy-faced Anson asked bluntly,

"Who's to set the price on it? You or us? There's practically a million dollars in that suitcase. It belongs to the bank. If you've got an idea that you can buy up the chance of it for about fifty percent—you're mistaken. We have too much faith in Mr. Boyne and his agency for that. Why, at this moment, one of his men may have laid hands on Clayte, or found the man who planned—"

He stopped with his mouth open. I saw the same suspicion that had taken his breath away grip momentarily every man at the table. A hint of it was in Whipple's voice as he asked, gravely:

"Do you bind yourself to pursue Clayte and bring him, if possible, to justice?"

"Bind myself to nothing. I'll give eight hundred thousand dollars for that suitcase."

He fumbled in his pocket with an interrogative look at Whipple, and, "May I smoke in here?" and lit a cigarette without waiting a reply.

Banking institutions take some pains to keep in their employ no young men who are known to play poker; but a poker face at that board would have acquired more than its share of dignity. As it was, you could see, almost as though written there, the agonizing doubt running riot in their faces as to whether Worth Gilbert was a young hero coming to the bank's rescue, or a con man playing them for suckers. It was Knapp who said at last, huskily,

"I think we should close with Captain Gilbert's offer." The cashier had a considerable family, and I knew his recently bought Pacific Avenue home was not all paid for.

"We might consider it," Whipple glanced doubtfully at his associates. "If everything else fails, this might be a way out of the difficulty for us."

If everything else failed! President Whipple was certainly no poker player. Worth Gilbert gave one swift look about the ring of faces, pushed a brown, muscular left hand out on the table top, glancing at the wrist watch there, and suggested brusquely,

"Think it over. My offer holds for fifteen minutes. Time to get at all the angles of the case. Huh! Gentlemen! I seem to have started something!"

For the directors and stockholders of the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank were at that moment almost as yappy and snappy as a wolf pack. Dykeman wanted to know about the one hundred and eighty seven thousand odd dollars not covered by Worth's offer—did they lose that? Knapp was urging that Clayte's bond, when they'd collected, would shade the loss; Whipple reminding them that they'd have to spend a good deal—maybe a great deal—on the recovery of the suitcase; money that Worth Gilbert would have to spend instead if they sold to him; and finally an ugly mutter from somewhere that maybe young Gilbert wouldn't have to spend so very much to recover that suitcase—maybe he wouldn't!

The tall young fellow looked thoughtfully at his watch now and again. Cummings and I chipped into the thickest of the row and convinced them that he meant what he said, not only by his offer, but by its time limit.

"How about publicity, if this goes?" Whipple suddenly interrogated, raising his voice to top the pack-yell. "Even with eight hundred thousand dollars in our vaults, a run's not a thing that does a bank any good. I suppose," stretching up his head to see across his noisy associates, "I suppose, Captain Gilbert, you'll be retaining Boyne's agency? In that case, do you give him the publicity he wants?"

"Course he does!" Dykeman hissed. "Can't you see? Damn fool wants his name in the papers! Rotten story like this—about some lunatic buying a suitcase with a million in it—would ruin any bank if it got into print." Dykeman's breath gave out. "And—it's—it's—just the kind of story the accursed yellow press would eat up. Let it alone, Whipple. Let his damned offer alone. There's a joker in it somewhere."

"There won't be any offer in about three minutes," Cummings quietly reminded them. "If you'd asked my opinion—and giving you opinions is what you pay me a salary for—I'd have said close with him while you can."

Whipple gave me an agonized glance. I nodded affirmatively. He put the question to vote in a breath; the ayes had it, old Dykeman shouting after them in an angry squeak.

"No! No!" and adding as he glared about him, "I'd like to be able to look a newspaper in the face; but never again! Never again!"

I made my way over to Gilbert and stood in front of him.

"You've bought something, boy," I said. "If you mean to keep me on as your detective, you can assure these people that I'll do my darndest to give information to the police and keep it out of the papers. What's happened here won't get any further than this room —through me."

"You're hired, Jerry Boyne." Gilbert slapped me on the back affectionately. After all, he hadn't changed so much in his four years over there; I began to see more than traces of the enthusiastic youngster to whom I used to spin detective yarns in the grill at the St. Francis or on the rocks by the Cliff House. "Sure, we'll keep it out of the papers. Suits me. I'd rather not pose as the fool soon parted from his money."

The remark was apropos; Knapp had feverishly beckoned the lawyer over to a little side desk; they were down at it, the light snapped on, writing, trying to frame up an agreement that would hold water. One by one the others went and looked on nervously as they worked; by the time they'd finished something, everybody'd seen it but Worth; and when it was finally put in his hands, all he seemed to notice was the one point of the time they'd set for payment.

"It'll be quite some stunt to get the amount together by ten o'clock Monday," he said slowly. "There are securities to be converted—"

He paused, and looked up on a queer hush.

"Securities?" croaked Dykeman. "To be converted—? Oh!"

"Yes," in some surprise. "Or would the bank prefer to have them turned over in their present form?"

Again a strained moment, broken by Whipple's nervous, "Maybe that would be better," and a quickly suppressed chuckle from Cummings.

The agreement was in duplicate. It gave Worth Gilbert complete ownership of a described sole-leather suitcase and its listed contents, and, as he had demanded, it bound him to nothing save the payment. Cummings said frankly that the transaction was illegal from end to end, and that any assurance as to the bank's ceasing to pursue Clayte would amount to compounding a felony. Yet we all signed solemnly, the lawyer and I as witnesses. A financier's idea of indecency is something about money which hasn't formerly been done. The directors got sorer and sorer as Worth Gilbert's cheerfulness increased.

"Acts as though it were a damn' crap game," I heard Dykeman muttering to Sillsbee, who came back vacuously.

"Craps?—they say our boys did shoot craps a good deal over there. Well—uh—they were risking their lives."

And that's as near as any of them came, I suppose, to understanding how a weariness of the little interweaving plans of tamed men had pushed Worth Gilbert into carelessly staking his birthright on a chance that might lend interest to life, a hazard big enough to breeze the staleness out of things for him.

We were leaving the bank, Gilbert and I ahead, Cummings right at my boy's shoulder, the others holding back to speak together, (bitterly enough, if I am any guesser) when Worth said suddenly,

"You mentioned in there it's being illegal for the bank to give up the pursuit of Clayte. Seems funny to me, but I suppose you know what you're talking about. Anyhow"—he was lighting another cigarette and he glanced sharply at Cummings across it—"anyhow, they won't waste their money hunting Clayte now, should you say? That's my job. That's where I get my cash back."

"Oh, that's where, is it?" The lawyer's dry tone might have been regarded as humorous. We stood in the deep doorway, hunching coat collars, looking into the foggy street. Worth's interest in life seemed to be freshening moment by moment.

"Yes," he agreed briskly. "I'm going to keep you and Boyne busy for a while. You'll have to show me how to hustle the payment for those Shylocks, and Jerry's got to find the suitcase, so I can eat. But I'll help him."

Cummings stared at the boy.

"Gilbert," he said, "where are you going?—right now, I mean."

"To Boyne's office."

We stepped out to the street where the line of limousines waited for the old fellows inside, my own battleship-gray roadster, pretty well hammered but still a mighty capable machine, far down at the end. As Worth moved with me toward it, the lawyer walked at his elbow.

"Seat for me?" he glanced at the car. "I've a few words of one syllable to say to this young man—council that I ought to get in as early as possible."

I looked at little Pete dozing behind the wheel, and answered,

"Take you all right, if I could drive. But I sprained my thumb on a window lock looking over that room at the St. Dunstan."

"I'll drive." Worth had circled the car with surprising quickness for so large a man. I saw him on the other side, waiting for Pete to get out so he could get in. Curious the intimate, understanding look he gave the monkey as he flipped a coin at him with, "Buy something to burn, kid." Pete's idea of Worth Gilbert would be quite different from that of the directors in there. After all, human beings are only what we see them from our varying angles. Pete slid down, looking back to the last at the tall young fellow who was taking his place at the wheel. Cummings and I got in and we were off.

There in the machine, my new boss driving, Cummings sitting next him, I at the further side, began the keen, cool probe after a truth which to me lay very evidently on the surface. Any one, I would have said, might see with half an eye that Worth Gilbert had bought Clayte's suitcase so that he could get a thrill out of hunting for it. Cummings I knew had in charge all the boy's Pacific Coast holdings; and since his mother's death during the first year of the war, these were large. Worth manifested toward them and the man who spoke to him of them the indifference, almost contempt, of an impatient young soul who in the years just behind him, had often wagered his chance of his morning's coffee against some other fellow's month's pay feeling that he was putting up double.

It seemed the sense of ownership was dulled in one who had seen magnificent properties masterless, or apparently belonging to some limp, bloodstained bundle of flesh that lay in one of the rooms. In vain Cummings urged the state of the market. repeating with more particularity and force what Whipple had said. The mines were tied up by strike; their stock, while perfectly good, was down to twenty cents on the dollar; to sell now would be madness. Worth only repeated doggedly.

"I've got to have the money—Monday morning—ten o'clock. I don't care what you sell—or hock. Get it."

"See here," the lawyer was puzzled, and therefore unprofessionally out of temper. "Even sacrificing your stuff in the most outrageous manner, I couldn't realize enough—not by ten o'clock Monday. You'll have to go to your father. You can catch the five-five for Santa Ysobel."

I could see Worth choke back a hot-tempered refusal of the suggestion. The funds he'd got to have, even if he went through some humiliation to get them.

"At that," he said slowly, "father wouldn't have any great amount of cash on hand. Say I went to him with the story—and took the cat-hauling he'll give me—should I be much better off?"

"Sure you would." Cummings leaned back. I saw he considered his point made. "Whipple would rather take their own bank stock than anything else. Your father has just acquired a big block of it. Act while there's time. Better go out there and see him now—at once."

"I'll think about it," Worth nodded. "You dig for me what you can and never quit." And he applied himself to the demands of the downtown traffic.

"Well," Cummings said, "drop me at the next corner, please. I've got an engagement with a man here."

Worth swung in and stopped. Cummings left us. As we began to worm a slow way toward my office, I suggested,

"You'll come upstairs with me, and—er—sort of outline a policy? I ought to have any possible information you can give me, so's not to make any more wrong moves than we have to."

"Information?" he echoed, and I hastened to amend,

"I mean whatever notion you've got. Your theory, you know—"

"Not a notion. Not a theory." He shook his head, eyes on the traffic cop. "That's your part."

I sat there somewhat flabbergasted. After all, I hadn't fully believed that the boy had absolutely nothing to go on, that he had bought purely at a whim, put up eight hundred thousand dollars on my skill at running down a criminal. It sort of crumpled me up. I said so. He laughed a little, ran up to the curb at the Phelan building, cut out the engine, set the brake and turned to me with,

"Don't worry. I'm getting what I paid for—or what I'm going to pay for. And I've got to go right after the money. Suppose I meet you, say, at ten o'clock to-night?"

"Suits me."

"At Tait's. Reserve a table, will you, and we'll have supper."

"You're on," I said. "And plenty to do myself meantime." I hopped out on my side.

Worth sat in the roadster, not hurrying himself to follow up Cummings' suggestion—the big boy, non-communicative, incurious, the question of fortune lost or won seeming not to trouble him at all. I skirted the machine and came round to him, demanding,

"With whom do you suppose Cummings' engagement was?"

"Don't know, Jerry, and don't care," looking down at me serenely. "Why should I?" He swung one long leg free and stopped idly, half in the car, half out.

"What if I told you Cummings' engagement was with our friend Dykeman—only Dykeman doesn't know it yet?"

Sowly he brought that dangling foot down to the pavement, followed it with the the other, and faced me. Across the blankness of his features shot a joyous gleam; it spread, brightening till he was radiant.

"I get you!" he chortled. "Collusion! They think I'm standing in with Clayte—Oh, boy!"

He threw back his head and roared.

CHAPTER III

A WEDDING PARTY

I LOOKED at my watch; quarter of ten; a little ahead of my appointment. I ordered a telephone extension brought to this corner table I had reserved at Tait's and got in touch with my office; then with the knowledge that any new kink in the case would be reported immediately to me, I relaxed to watch the early supper crowd arrive: Women in picture hats and bare or half-bare shoulders with rich wraps slipping off them; hum of voices; the clatter of silver and china; waiters beginning to wake up and dart about settling new arrivals. And I wondered idly what sort of party would come to sit around one long table across from me specially decorated with pale tinted flowers.

There was a sense of warmth and comfort at my heart. I am a lonely man; the people I take to seem to have a way of passing on in the stream of life—or death—leaving me with a few well-thumbed volumes on a shelf in my rooms for consolation. Walt Whitman, Montaigne, The Bard, two or three other lesser poets, and you've the friends that have stayed by me for thirty years. And so, having met up with Worth Gilbert when he was a youngster, at the time his mother was living in San Francisco to get a residence for her divorce proceedings, having loved the boy and got I am sure some measure of affection in return, it seemed almost too much to ask of fate that he should come back into my days, plunge into such a proposition as this bank robbery, right at my elbow as it were, and make himself my employer—my boss.

I was a subordinate in the agency in those old times when he and I used to chin about the business, and his idea (I always discussed it gravely and respectfully with him) was to grow up and go into partnership with me. Well, we were partners now.

Past ten, nearly five minutes. Where was he? What up to? Would he miss his appointment? No, I caught a glimpse of him at the door getting rid of hat and overcoat, pausing a moment with tall bent head to banter Rose, the little Chinese girl who usually drifted from table to table with cigars and cigarettes. Then he was coming down the room.

A man who takes his own path in life, and will walk it though hell bar the way, never explaining, never extenuating, never excusing his course—something seems to emanate from such a chap that draws all eyes after him in a public place in a look between fear and desire. Sitting there in Tait's, my view of Worth cut off now by a waiter with a high-carried tray, again by people passing to tables for whom he halted, I had a good chance to see the turning of eyeballs that followed him, the furtive glances that snatched at him, or fondled him, or would have probed him; the admiration of the women, the envy of the men, curiously alike in that it was sometimes veiled and half wistful, sometimes very open. Drifters—you see so many of the sort in a restaurant—why wouldn't they hanker after the strength and ruthlessness of a man like Worth? And the poor prunes, how little they knew him! As my friend Walt would say, he wasn't out after any of the old, smooth prizes they cared for. And win or lose he would still be a victor, for all he and his sort demand is freedom, and the joy of the game. So he came on to me.

I noticed, a little startled, as he slumped into his chair with a grunt of greeting, that his cheek was somehow gaunt and pale under the tan; the blue fire of his eyes only smoldered, and I pulled back his chair with,

"You look as if you hadn't had any dinner."

"I haven't." He gave a man-size order for food and turned back from it to listen to me. "I'll be nearer human when I get some grub under my belt."

My report of what had been done on the case since we separated was interrupted by the arrival of our orders, and Worth sailed into a thick, juicy steak while I was still explaining details. The orchestra whanged and blared and jazzed away; the people at the other tables noticed us or busied themselves noisily with affairs of their own; Worth sat and enjoyed his meal with the air of a man feeding at a solitary country tavern. When he had finished—and he took his time about it—the worn, punished look was gone from his face; his eye was bright, his tone nonchalant, as he lighted a cigarette, remarking,

"I've had one more good dinner. Food's a thing you can depend on; it doesn't rake up your entire past record from the time you squirmed into this world, and tell you what a fool you've always been."

I turned that over in my mind. Did it mean that he'd seen his father and got a calling down? I wanted to know—and was afraid to ask. The fact is I was beginning to wake up to a good many things about my young boss. I was intensely interested in his reactions on people. So far, I'd seen him with strangers. I wished that I might have a chance to observe him among intimates. Old Richardson who founded our agency (and would never knowingly have left me at the head of it, though he did take me in as partner, finally) used to say that the main trouble with me was I studied people instead of cases. Richardson held that all men are equal before the detective, and must be regarded only as queer shaped pieces to be fitted together so as to make out a case. Richardson would have gone as coolly about easing the salt of the earth into the chink labeled "murder" or "embezzlement," as though neither had been human. With me the personal equation always looms big, and of course he was quite right in saying that it's likely to get you all gummed up.

The telephone on the table before me rang. It was Roberts, my secretary, with the word that Foster had lifted the watch from Ocean View, the little town at the neck of the peninsula, where bay and ocean narrow the passageway to one thoroughfare, over which every machine must pass that goes by land from San Francisco. With two operatives, he had been on guard there since three o'clock of the afternoon, holding up blond men in cars, asking questions, taking notes and numbers. Now he reported it was a useless waste of time.

"Order him in," I instructed Roberts.

A far-too-fat entertainer out on the floor was writhing in the pangs of an Hawaiian dance. It took the attention of the crowd. I watched the face of my companion for a moment, then, "Worth," I said a bit nervously—after all, I nearly had to know—"is your father going to come through?"

"Eh?" He looked at me startled, then put it aside negligently. "Oh, the money? No. I'll leave that up to Cummings." A brief pause. "We'll get a wiggle on us and dig up the suitcase." He lifted his tumbler, stared at it, then unseeingly out across the room, and his lip twitched in a half smile. "I'm sure glad I bought it."

Looking at him, I had no reason to doubt his word. His enjoyment of the situation seemed to grow with every detail I brought up.

It was near eleven when the party came in to take the long, flower-trimmed table. Worth's back was to the room; I saw them over his shoulder, in the lead a tall blonde, very smartly dressed, but not in evening clothes; in severe, exclusive street wear. The man with her, good looking, almost her own type, had that possessive air which seems somehow unmistakable—and there was a look about the half dozen companions after them, as they settled themselves in a great flurry of scraping chairs, that made me murmur with a grin,

"Bet that's a wedding party."

Worth gave them one quick glance, then came round to me with a smile.

"You win. Married at Santa Ysobel this afternoon. Local society event. Whole place standing on its hind legs, taking notice."

So he had been down to the little town to see his father after all. And he wasn't going to talk about it. Oh, well.

"Friends of yours?" I asked perfunctorily, and he gave me a queer look out of the corners of those wicked eyes, repeating in an enjoying drawl.

"Friends? Oh, hardly that. The girl I was to have married, and Bronson Vandeman—the man she has married."

I had wanted to get a more intimate line on the kid—it seemed that here was a chance with a vengeance!

"The rest of the bunch?" I suggested. He took a leisurely survey, and gave them three words:

"Family and accomplices."

"Santa Ysobel people, too, then. Folks you know well?"

"Used to."

"The lady changed her mind while you were across?" I risked the query.

"While I was shedding my blood for my country." He nodded. "Gave me the butt while the Huns were using the bayonet on me."

In the careless jeer, as much at himself as at her, no hint what his present feeling might be toward the fashion plate young female across there. With some fellows, in such a situation, I should have looked for a disposition to duck the encounter; let his old sweetheart's wedding party leave without seeing him; with others I should have discounted a dramatic moment when he would court the meeting. It was impossible to suppose either thing of Worth Gilbert; plain that he simply sat there because he sat there, and would make no move toward the other table unless something in that direction interested him—pleasantly or unpleasantly—which at present nothing seemed to do.

So we smoked, Worth indifferent, I giving all the attention to the people over there: bride and groom; a couple of fair haired girls so like the bride that I guessed them to be sisters; a freckled, impudent looking little flapper I wasn't so sure of; two older men, and an older woman. Then a shifting of figures gave me sight of a face that I hadn't seen before, and I drew in my breath with a whistle.

"Whew! Who's the dark girl? She's a beauty!"

"Dark girl?" Worth had interest enough to lean into the place where I got my view; after he did so he remained to stare. I sat and grinned while he muttered,

"Can't be. . . . I believe it is!"

Something to make him sit up and take notice now. I didn't wonder at his fixed study of the young creature. Not so dressed up as the others—I think she wore what ladies call an evening blouse with a street suit; a brunette, but of a tinting so delicate that she fairly sparkled, she took the shine off those blonde girls. Her small beautifully formed, uncovered head had the living jet of the crow's wing; her great eyes, long-lashed and sumptuously set, showed ebon irises almost obliterating the white. Dark, shining, she was a night with stars, that girl.

"Funny thing," Worth spoke, moving his head to keep in line with that face. "How could she grow up to be like this—a child that wasn't allowed any childhood? Lord, she never even had a doll!"

"Some doll herself now," I smiled.

"Yeh," he assented absently, "she's good looking—but where did she learn to dress like that—and play the game?"

"Where they all learn it." I enjoyed very much seeing him interested. "From her mother, and her sisters, or the other girls."

"Not." He was positive. "Her mother died when she was a baby. Her father wouldn't let her be with other children—treated her like one of the instruments in his laboratory; trained her in her high chair; problems in concentration dumped down into its tray, punishment if she made a failure; God knows what kind of a reward if she succeeded; maybe no more than her bowl of bread and milk. That's the kind of a deal she got when she was a kid. And will you look at her now!"

If he kept up his open staring at the girl, it would be only a matter of time when the wedding party discovered him. I leaned back in my chair to watch, while Worth, full of his subject, spilled over in words.

"Never played with anybody in her life—but me," he said unexpectedly. "They lived next house but one to us; the professor had the rest of the Santa Ysobel youngsters terrorized, backed off the boards; but I wasn't a steady resident of the burg. I came and went, and when I came, it was playtime for the little girl."

"What was her father? Crank on education?"

"Psychology," Worth said briefly. "International reputation. But he ought to have been hung for the way he brought Bobs up. Listen to this, Jerry. I got off the train one time at Santa Ysobel—can't remember just when, but the kid over there was all shanks and eyes—'bout ten or eleven, I'd say. Her father had her down at the station doing a stunt for a bunch of professors. That was his notion of a nice, normal development for a small child. There she sat poked up cross-legged on a baggage truck. He'd trained her to sit in that self balanced position so she could make her mind blank without going to sleep. A freight train was hitting a twenty mile clip past the station, and she was adding the numbers on the sides of the box cars, in her mind. It kept those professors on the jump to get the figures down in their notebooks, but she told them the total as the caboose was passing."

"Some stunt," I agreed. "Freight car numbers run up into the ten-thousands." Worth didn't hear me, he was still deep in the past.

"Poor little white-faced kid," he muttered. "I dumped my valises, horned into that bunch, picked her off the truck and carried her away on my shoulder, while the professor yelled at me, and the other ginks were tabbing up their additions. And I damned every one of them, to hell and through it."

"You must have been a popular youth in your home town," I suggested.

"I was," he grinned. "My reason for telling you that story, though, is that I've got an idea about the girl over there—if she hasn't changed too much. I think maybe we might—"

He stood up calmly to study her, and his tall figure instantly drew the attention of everybody in the room. Over at the long table it was the sharp, roving eye of the snub-nosed flapper that spied him first. I saw her give the alarm and begin pushing back her chair to bolt right across and nab him. The sister sitting next stopped her. Judging from the glimpses I had as the party spoke together and leaned to look, it was quite a sensation. But apparently by common consent they left whatever move was to be made to the bride; and to my surprise this move was most unconventional. She got up with an abrupt gesture and started over to our table—alone. This, for a girl of her sort, was going some. I glanced doubtfully at Worth. He shrugged a little.

"Might as well have it over. Her family lives on one side of us, and Brons Vandeman on the other."

And then the bride was with us. She didn't overdo the thing—much; only held out her hand with a slightly pleading air as though half afraid it would be refused. And it was a curious thing to see that pretty, delicate featured, schooled face of hers naïvely drawn in lines of emotion—like a bisque doll registering grief.

Gilbert took the hand, shook it, and looked around with the evident intention of presenting me. I saw by the way the lady gave me her shoulder, pushing in, speaking low, that she didn't want anything of the sort, and quietly dropped back. I barely got a side view of Worth's face, but plainly his calmness was a disappointment to her.

"After these years!" I caught the fringes of what she was saying. "It seems like a dream. To-night—of all times. But you will come over to our table—for a minute anyhow? They're just going to—to drink our health—Oh, Worth!" That last in a sort of impassioned whisper. And all he answered was,

"If I might bring Mr. Boyne with me, Mrs. Vandeman." At her protesting expression, he finished, "Or do I call you Ina, still?"

She gave him a second look of reproach, acknowledging my introduction in that way some women have which assures you they don't intend to know you in the least the next time. We crossed to the table and met the others.

If anybody had asked my opinion, I should have said it was a mistake to go. Our advent in that party—or rather Worth Gilbert's advent—was bound to throw the affair into a sort of consternation. No mistake about that. The bridegroom at the head of the table seemed the only one able to keep a grip on the situation. He welcomed Worth as though he wanted him, took hold of me with a glad hand, and presented me in such rapid succession to everybody there that I was dizzy. And through it all I had an eye for Worth as he met and disposed of the effusive welcome of the younger Thornhill girls. Either of the twins, as I found them to be, would, I judged, have been more than willing to fill out sister Ina's unexpired term, and the little snub-nosed one, also a sister it seemed, plainly adored him, as a hero, sexlessly, as they sometimes can at that age.

While yet he shook hands with the girls, and swapped short replies for long questions, I became conscious of something odd in the air. Plain enough sailing with the young ladies; all the noise with them echoed the bride's, "After all these years." They clattered about whether he looked like his last photograph, and how perfectly delightful it was going to be to have him back in Santa Ysobel again.

But when it came to the chaperone, a Mrs. Dr. Bowman, things were different. No longer young, though still beautiful in what I might call a sort of wasted fashion, with slim wrists and fragile fingers, and a splendid mass of rich, auburn hair, I had been startled, even looking across from our table, by the extreme nervous tension of her face. She looked a neurasthenic; but that was not all; surely her nerves were almost from under control as she sat there, her rich cloak dropped back over her chair, the corners caught up again and fumbled in a twisting, restless hold.

Now, when Worth stood before her appealing eyes, she reached up and clutched his hand in both of hers, staring at him through quick tears, saying something in a low, choking tone, something that I couldn't for the life of me make into the greeting you give even a beloved youngster you haven't seen for several years.

At the moment, I was myself being presented to the lady's husband, a typical top-grade, small town medical man, with a fine bedside manner. His nice, smooth white hands, with which I had watched him feeling the pulse of his supper as though it had been a wealthy patient, released mine; those cold eyes of his, that hid a lot of meaning under heavy lids, came around on his wife. His,

"Laura, control yourself. Where do you think you are?" was like a lash.

It worked perfectly. Of course she would be his patient as well as his wife. Yet I hated the man for it. To me it seemed like the cut of the whip that punishes a sensitive, over excited Irish setter for a fault in the hunting field. Mrs. Bowman quivered, pulled herself together and sat down, but her gaze followed the boy.

She sat there stilled, but not quieted, under her husband's eye, and watched Worth's meeting with the other man, whom I heard the boy call Jim Edwards, and with whom he shook hands, but who met him, as Mrs. Bowman had, as though there had been something recent between them; not like people bridging a long gap of absence.

And this man, tall, thin, the power in his features contradicted by a pair of soft dark eyes, deep-set, looking out at you with an expression of bafflement, defeat —why did he face Worth with the stare of one drenched, drowned in woe? It wasn't his wedding. He hadn't done Worth any dirt in the matter.

And I was wedged in beside the beautiful dark girl, without having been presented to her, without even having had the luck to hear what name Worth used when he spoke to her. At last the flurry of our coming settled down (though I still felt that we were stuck like a sliver into the wedding party, that the whole thing ached from us) and Dr. Bowman proposed the health of the happy couple, his bedside manner going over pretty well, as he informed Vandeman and the rest of us that the bridegroom was a social leader in Santa Ysobel, and that the hope of its best people was to place him and his bride at the head of things there, leading off with the annual Blossom Festival, due in about a fortnight.

Vandeman responded for himself and his bride, appropriately, with what I'd call a sort of acceptable, fabricated geniality. You could see he was the kind that takes such things seriously, one who would go to work to make a success of any social doings he got into, would give what his set called good parties; and he spoke feelingly of the Blossom Festival, which was the great annual event of a little town. If by putting his shoulder to the wheel he could boost that affair into nation-wide fame and place a garland of rich bloom upon the brow of his fair city, he was willing to take off his neatly tailored coat, roll up his immaculate shirtsleeves and go to it.

There was no time for speech making. The girls wanted to dance; bride and groom were taking the one o'clock train for the south and Coronado. The orchestra swung into "I'll Say She Does."

"Just time for one." Vandeman guided his bride neatly out between the chairs, and they moved away. I turned from watching them to find Worth asking Mrs. Bowman to dance.

"Oh, Worth, *dearest!* I ought to let one of the girls have you, but—"

She looked helplessly up at him; he smiled down into her tense, suffering face, and paid no attention to her objections. As soon as he carried her off, Jim Edwards glumly took out that one of the twins I had at first supposed to be the elder, the remaining Thornhill girls moved on Dr. Bowman and began nagging him to hunt partners for them.

"Drag something up here," prompted the freckled tomboy, "or I'll make you dance with me yourself." She grabbed a coat lapel, and started away with him.

I turned and laughed into the laughing face of the dark girl. I had no idea of her name, yet a haunting resemblance, a something somehow familiar came across to me which I thought for a moment was only the sweet approachableness of her young femininity.

Bowman had found and collared a partner for Ernestine Thornhill, but that was as far as it went. The little one forebore her threat of making him dance with her, came back to her chair and tucked herself in, snuggling up to the girl beside me, getting hold of a hand and looking at me across it. She rejoiced, it seems, in the nickname of Skeet, for by that the other now spoke to her whisperingly, saying it was too bad about the dance.

"That's nothing," Skeet answered promptly. "I'd a lot rather sit here and talk to you—and your gentleman friend—" with a large wink for me—"if you don't mind."

At the humorous, intimate glance which again passed between me and the dark girl, sudden remembrance came to me, and I ejaculated,

"I know you now!"

"Only now?" smiling.

"You've changed a good deal in seven years," I defended myself.

"And you so very little," she was still smiling, "that I had almost a mind to come and shake hands with you when Ina went to speak to Worth."

I remembered then that it was Worth's recognition of her which had brought him to his feet. I told her of it, and the glowing, vivid face was suddenly all rosy. Skeet regarded the manifestation askance, asking jealously,

"When did you see Worth last, Barbie? You weren't still living in Santa Ysobel when he left, were you?"

I sat thinking while the girlish voices talked on. Barbie—the nickname for Barbara. Barbara Wallace; the name jumped at me from a poster; that's where I first saw it. It linked itself up with what Worth had said over there about the forlorn childhood of this beguiling young charmer. Why hadn't I remembered then? I, too, had my recollections of Barbara Wallace. About seven years before, I had first seen her, a slim, dark little thing of twelve or fourteen, very badly dressed in slinky, too-long skirts that whipped around preposterously thin ankles, blue-black hair dragged away from a forehead almost too fine, made into a bundle of some fashion that belonged neither to childhood nor womanhood, her little, pointed face redeemed by a pair of big black eyes with a wonderful inner light, the eyes of this girl glowing here at my left hand.

The father Worth spoke of brusquely as "the professor" was Elman Wallace, to whom all students of advanced psychology are heavily indebted. The year I heard him, and saw the girl, his course of lectures at Stanford University was making quite a stir. I had been one of a bunch of criminologists, detectives and police chiefs who, during a state convention were given a demonstration of the little girl's powers, closing with a sort of rapid pantomime in which I was asked to take part. A half dozen of us from the audience planned exactly what we were to do. I rushed into the room through one door, holding my straw hat in my left hand, and wiping my brow with a handkerchief with the right. From an opposite door, came two men; one of them fired at me twice with a revolver held in his left hand. I fell, and the second man—the one who wasn't armed—ran to me as I staggered, grabbed my hat, and the two of them went out the door I had entered, while I stumbled through the one by which they had come in. It lasted all told, not half a minute, the idea being for those who looked on to write down what had happened.

Those trained criminologists, supposed to have eyes in their heads, didn't see half that really took place, and saw a-plenty that did not. Most of 'em would have hung the man who snatched my hat. Only one, I remember, noticed that I was shot by a left-handed man. Then the little girl told us what really had occurred, every detail, just as though she had planned it instead of being merely an observer.

"Pardon me," I broke in on the girls. "Miss Wallace, you don't mean to say that you really know me again after seeing me once, seven years ago, in a group of other men at a public performance?"

"Why shouldn't I? You saw me then. You knew me again."

"But you were doing wonderful things. We remember what strikes us as that did me."

She looked at me with a little fading of that glow her face seemed always to hold.

"Most memories are like that," she agreed listlessly. "Mine isn't. It works like a cinema camera; I've only to turn the crank the other way to be looking at any past record."

"But can you—?" I was beginning, when Skeet stopped me, leaning around her companion, bristling at me like a snub-nosed terrier.

"If you want to make a hit with Barbie, cut out the reminiscences. She does loathe being reminded that she was once an infant phenom."

I glanced at my dark eyed girl; she bent her head affirmatively. She wouldn't have been capable of Skeet's rudeness, but plainly Skeet had not overstated her real feeling. I had hardly begun an apology when the dancers rushed back to the table with the information that there was no more than time to make the Los Angeles train; there was an instant grasping of wraps, hasty good-bys, and the party began breaking up with a bang. Worth went out to the sidewalk with them; I sat tight waiting for him to return, and to my surprise, when he finally did appear, Barbara Wallace was with him.

CHAPTER IV

AN APPARITION

"DON'T look so scared!" she said smilingly to me. "I'm only on your hands a few minutes; a package left to be called for."

I had watched them coming back to me at our old table, with its telephone extension, the girl with eyes for no one but Worth, who helped her out of her wrap now with a preoccupied air and,

"Shed the coat, Bobs," adding as he seated her beside him, "The luck of luck that I chanced on you here this evening."

That brought the color into her face; the delicate rose shifted under her translucent skin almost with the effect of light, until that lustrous midnight beauty of hers was as richly glowing as one of those marvellous dark opals of the antipodes.

"Yes," she said softly, with a smile that set two dimples deep in the pink of her cheeks, "wasn't it strange our meeting this way?" Worth wasn't looking at her. He'd signaled a waiter, ordered a pot of black coffee, and was watching its approach. "I didn't go down to the wedding, but Ina herself invited me to come here to-night. I had half a mind not to; then at the last minute I decided I would—and I met you!"

Worth nodded, sat there humped in a brown study while the waiter poured our coffee. The minute the man left us alone, he turned to her with, "I've got a stunt for you."

"A—a stunt?"

The light failed abruptly in her face; her mouth with its soft, firm molding, its vivid, floral red, like the lips of a child, went down a bit at the clean-cut corners. A small hand fumbled the trimming of her blouse; it was almost as if she laid it over a wounded heart.

"Yes," he nodded. "Jerry's got something in his pocket that'll be pie for you."

She turned to me a look between angry and piteous—the resentment she would not vent on him.

"Is—is Mr. Boyne interested in stunts—such as I used to do?"

"Sure," Worth agreed. "We both are. We—"

"Oh, that was why you wanted me to come back with you?" She had got hold of herself now. She was more poised, but still resentful.

"Bobs," he cut straight across her mood to what he wanted, "Jerry Boyne is going to read you something it took about 'steen blind people to see—and you'll give us the answer." I didn't share his confidence, but I rather admired it as he finished, poising the tongs, "One lump, or two?"

Of course I knew what he meant. My hand was already fumbling in my pocket for the description of Clayte. The girl looked as though she wasn't going to answer him; she moved to shove back her chair. Worth's only recognition of her attitude was to put out a hand quietly, touch her arm, not once looking at her, and say in a lowered tone,

"Steady, Bobs." And then, "Did you say one lump or two?"

"None." Her voice was scarcely audible, but I saw she was going to stay; that Worth was to have his way, to get from her the opinion he wanted—whatever that might amount to. And I passed the paper to him, suggesting,

"Let her read it. This is too public a place to be declaiming a thing of the sort."

She hesitated a minute then gave it such a mere flirt of a glance that I hardly thought she'd seen what it was, before she raised inquiring eyes to mine and asked coldly,

"Why shouldn't that be read—shouted every ten minutes by the traffic officer at Market and Kearny? They'd only think he was paging every other man in the Palace Hotel."

I leaned back and chuckled. After a bare glance, this sharp witted girl had hit on exactly what I'd thought of the Clayte description.

"Is that all? May I go now, Worth?" she said, still with that dashed, disappointed look from one of us to the other. "If you'll just put me on a Haight Street car—I won't wait for—" And now she made a definite movement to rise; but again Worth held her by the mere touch of his fingers on her sleeve.

"Wait, Bobs," he said. "There's more."

"More?" Her eyes on Worth's face talked louder than her tongue, but that also gained fluency as he looked back at her and nodded. "Stunts!" she repeated his word bitterly. "I didn't expect you to come back asking me to do stunts. I hated it all so—working out things like a calculating machine!" Her voice sank to a vehement undertone. "Nobody thinking of me as human, with human feelings. I have never—done—one stunt—since my father died."

She didn't weaken. She sat there and looked Worth squarely in the eye, yet there was a kind of big gentleness in her refusal, a freedom from petty resentment, that had in it not so much a girl's hurt vanity as the outspoken complaint of a really grieved heart.

"But, Bobs," Worth smiled at her trouble, about the same careless, good-natured smile he had given little Pete when he flipped him the quarter, "suppose you could possibly save me a hundred thousand dollars a minute?"

"Then it's not just a stunt?" She settled slowly back in her chair.

"Certainly not," I said. "This is business—with me, anyhow. Miss Wallace, why do you think a description like that could be shouted on the street without any one being the wiser?"

"Was it supposed to be a description?" she asked, raising her brows a bit.

"The best we could get from sixteen or eighteen people, most of whom have known the man a long time; some of them for eight years."

"And no one—not one of all these people could differentiate him?"

"I've done my best at questioning them."

She gave me one straight, level look, and I wondered a little at the way those velvety black eyes could saw into a fellow. But she put no query, and I had the cheap satisfaction of knowing that she was convinced I'd overlooked no details in the quiz that went to make up that description. Then she turned to Worth.

"You said I might save you a lot of money. Has the man you're trying here to describe anything to do with money—in large amounts—financial affairs of importance?"

Again the little girl had unconsciously scored with me. To imagine a rabbit like Clayte, alone, swinging such an enormous job was ridiculous. From the first, my mind had been reaching after the others—the big-brained criminals, the planners whose instrument he was. She evidently saw this, but Worth answered her.

"He's quite a financier, Bobs. He walked off with nearly a million cash to-day."

"From you?" with a quick breath.

"I'm the main loser if he gets away with it."

"Tell me about it."

And Worth gave her a concise account of the theft and his own share in the affair. She listened eagerly now, those innocent great eyes growing big with the interest of it. With her there was no blind stumbling over Worth's motive in buying a suitcase sight unseen. I had guessed, but she understood completely and unquestioningly. When he had finished, she said solemnly,

"You know, don't you, that, if you've got your facts right—if these things you've told me are square, even cubes of fact—they prove Clayte among the wonderful men of the world?"

Worth's big brown paw went out and covered her little hand that lay on the table's edge.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he encouraged her. As for me, I merely snorted.

"Wonderful man, my eye! He's got a wonderful gang behind him."

"Oh, you should have told me that you know there is a gang, Mr. Boyne," she said simply. "Of course, then, the result is different."

"Well," I hedged, "there's a gang all right. But suppose there wasn't, how would you find any wonderfulness in a creature as near nothing as this Clayte?"

She sat and thought for a moment, drawing imaginary lines on the table top, finally looking up at me with a narrowing of the lids, a tightening of the lips, which gave an extraordinary look of power to her young feminine face.

"In that case, Clayte would inevitably be one of the wonderful men of the world," she repeated her characterization with the placid, soft obstinacy of falling snow. "Didn't you stop a minute—one little minute, Mr. Boyne—to think it wonderful that a man so devoid of personality as that—" she slanted a slim finger across the description of Clayte—"Didn't you add up in your mind all that you told me about the men disagreeing as to which side he parted his hair on, whether he wore tan shoes or black, a fedora or derby, smoked or didn't,—absolutely nothing left as to peculiarities of face, figure, movement, expression, manner or habit to catch the eye of one single observer among the sixteen or eighteen you questioned—surely you added that up, Mr. Boyne? What result did you get?"

"Nothing," I admitted. "To hear you repeat it, of course it sounds as if the man was a freak. But he wasn't. He was just one of those fellows that are born utterly commonplace, and slide through life without getting any marks put on 'em."

"And is it nothing that this man became a teller in a bank without infringing at all on the circle of his nothingness? Remained so shadowy that neither the president nor cashier can, after eight years' association, tell the color of his hair and eyes? Then add the fact that he is the one clerk in the bank without a filed photograph and description on record with your agency—what result now, Mr. Boyne?"

"A coincidence," I said, rather hastily.

"Don't, please, Mr. Boyne!" her eyes glowed softly as she smiled her mild sarcasm. "Admit that he has ceased to be a freak and becomes a marvel."

"As you put it—" I began, but she cut in on me with,

"I haven't put it yet. Listen." She was smiling still, but it was plain she was thoroughly in earnest. "When this cipher—this nought—this zero—manages to annex to himself a million dollars that doesn't belong to him, his nothingness gains a specific meaning. The zero is an important factor in mathematics. I think we have placed a digit before the long string of ciphers of Clayte's nothingness."

"Nothing and nothing—make nothing." I spoke more brusquely because I was irritated by her logic. "You called the turn when you spoke of him as a zero. There are digits to be added, but they're the gang that planned and helped—and used zero Clayte as their tool. You're talking of those digits, not Clayte."

"I believe Bobs'll find them for you, Jerry—if you'll let her," said Worth.

"Oh, I'll let anybody do anything"—a bit nettled. "I'm ready to have our friend Clayte take his place, with the pyramids and the hanging gardens of Babylon, among the earth's wonders; but you've got to show me."

"All right." Worth gave the girl a look that brought something of that wonderful rose flush fluttering back into her cheeks. "I'm betting on her. Go to it, Bobsie—let him in on your mathematical logic."

"You used the word 'coincidence,' Mr. Boyne." She leaned across toward me, eyes bright, little finger tip marking her points. "Allow one coincidence—that the only description, the only photograph missing from your files are those of the self-effacing Clayte. To-day Clayte has proved to be a thief—"

"In seven figures," Worth threw in, and she smiled at him.

"You would call that another coincidence, Mr. Boyne?"

I nodded, rather unable at the moment to think of a better word to use.

"Two coincidences," she went on,—"we are still in mathematics—you can't add. They run by geometrical progression into the impossible."

The phone rang. While I turned to answer it, my mind was still hunting a comeback to this. The call was from Foster, just in from Ocean View and reporting for instructions. Covering the transmitter with my hand, I told Worth the situation and asked,

"Any suggestions?"

"Not I," he shook his head. I added, a bit sarcastically, "Or you, Miss Wallace?"

"Yes," she surprised me. "Have your man Foster find three women who have seen Edward Clayte; get from them the color of his hair and eyes; tell him to have them be exact about it."

"Fine! But you know they'll not agree, any more than the other people agreed."

"Oh, yes they will," she laughed at me a little. "Don't you notice that a girl always says a blue-eyed man or a brown-eyed man? That's what she sees when she first meets him, and it sticks in her mind. Girls and women sort out people by types; small differences in color mean something to them."

I didn't keep Foster waiting any longer.

"Hello," I spoke quickly into the transmitter. "Get busy and dig out any women clerks of the bank, stenographers, scrub-women there, or whatever, and ask them particularly as to the exact shade of Clayte's hair and eyes. Get Mrs. Griggsby again at the St. Dunstan. I want at least three women who can give these points exactly. Exactly, understand?"

He did, and I thanked Miss Wallace for her suggestion.

"Now that," I said, "is what I want; a good, practical idea—"

"And it won't be a bit of use in the world to you," she laughed across the table into my eyes. "Why, Mr. Boyne, you've found out already that there are too many Edward Claytes, speaking in physical terms, for you to run one down by description. There are three of him here, within sight of our table right now—and the place isn't crowded."

I grinned in half grudging agreement, and found nothing to say. It was Worth who spoke.

"Like to have you go a step further in this, if you would," and when she shook her head, he went on a bit sharply. "See here, Bobs; you and I used to be pals, didn't we?" She nodded, her look brightening. "Well then, here's the biggest game I've been up against since I crawled out of the trenches and shucked my uniform. I come to you and give you the high-sign—and you throw me down. You don't want to play with me—is that it?"

"Oh, Worth! I do. I do want to play with you," she was almost in tears now. "But you see, I didn't quite understand. I felt as though you were sort of putting me through my paces."

"Sure not," Worth drove it at her like a turbulent urchin. "I'm having the time of my young life with this thing, and I want to take you in on it."

"If—if you fail you lose a lot of money; wasn't that what you said?" she questioned.

"Oh, yes," he nodded, "Nothing in it if there weren't a gamble."

"And if he wins out, he makes quite a respectable pile," I added.

"What I want of you now," he explained, "is to go with us to Clayte's room at the St. Dunstan—the room he disappeared from—look it over and tell us how he got out and where he went."

He made his request light-heartedly; she considered it after the same fashion; it seemed to me all absurdity.

"To-morrow morning—Sunday," she said. "No office to-morrow," she sipped the last of her black coffee slowly. "All the rest of the facts there ever will be about Edward Clayte are in that room—aren't they?" Her voice was musing; she looked straight ahead of her as she finished softly, "What time do we go?"

"Early. Does nine o'clock suit you?" Worth didn't even glance at me as he made this arrangement for us both. "We'd scoot up there now if it wasn't so late."

"I've no doubt you'll find the place carpeted with zeros and hung with noughts and ciphers." I couldn't refrain from joshing her a little. She took it with a smile glanced across the room, looked a little surprised, and half rose with,

"Why, there they are for me now."

I couldn't see anybody that she might mean, except a man who had walked the length of the place talking to the head waiter, and now stood arguing at the corner of what had been Bronson Vandeman's supper table. This man evidently had his attention directed to us, turned, looked, and in the moment of his crossing I saw that it was Cummings. There was not even the usual tight-lipped half smile under that cropped mustache of his.

"Good evening." He looked at our faces, uttering none of the surprise he plainly felt, letting the two words do for greeting to us all, and, as it seemed, to me, an expression of disapproval as well. The young lady replied first.

"Oh, Mr. Cummings, did they send you for me? Where are the others?"

She had come to her feet, and reached for the coat which Worth was holding more as if he meant to keep it than put it on her.

"I left your chaperone waiting in the machine," Cumming's tone and look carried a plain hurry-up. Worth took his time about the coat, and spoke low to the girl while he helped her into it.

"You'll go with us to-morrow morning?"

She gave me one of those adorable smiles that brought the dimples momentarily in her cheeks.

"If Mr. Boyne wants me. He hasn't said yet."

"Do I need to?" I asked. The question seemed reasonable. There she stood, such a very pretty girl, between her two cavaliers who looked at each other with all the traditional hostility that belonged to the situation. She smiled on both, and didn't neglect me. I settled the matter with,

"Worth has your address; we'll call for you in my machine." And I got the idea that Cummings was asking questions about it as he went away holding her arm.

"Do you think the little girl will really be of any use?" I spoke to the back of Worth's head as he continued to stare after them.

"Sure. I know she will." He shoved his crumpled napkin in among the coffee service, and we moved toward the desk. "Sure she will," he repeated. "Wonder where she met Cummings."

CHAPTER V

AT THE ST. DUNSTAN

AT the Palace Hotel Sunday morning where I went to pick up Worth before we should call for little Miss Wallace, he met me in high spirits and with an enthusiasm that demanded immediate physical action.

"Heh," I said, "you look fine. Must have slept well."

"Make it rested, and I'll go you," he came back cheerfully.

He'd already been out, going down to the Grant Avenue corner for an assortment of Bay cities papers not to be had at the hotel news-stands, so that he could see whether our canny announcement of Clayte's fifteen thousand dollar defalcation had received discreet attention from the Associated Press.

For my part, our agency had been able to get hold of three women who had seen Clayte and remembered the event; Mrs. Griggsby; a stenographer at the bank; and the woman who sold newspapers at the St. Dunstan corner. Miss Wallace's suggestion had proven itself, for these three agreed with fair exactness, and the description run in the late editions of the city papers was less vague than the others. It gave Clayte's eyes as a pale gray-blue, and his hair as dull brown, eliminating at least all brown-eyed men. Worth asserted warmly,

"That girl's going to be useful to us, Boyne." I couldn't well disagree with him, after using her hint. We were getting out of the elevator on the office floor when he looked at me, grinned boyishly, and added, "What would you say if I told you I was being shadowed?"

"That I thought it very likely," I nodded. "Also I might hazard a guess at whose money is paying for it."

He gave me a quick glance, but asked no questions. I could see he was enjoying his position, up to the hilt, considered the attentions of a trailer as one of its perquisites.

"Keep your eyes open and you'll spot him as we go out," he said as he left the key at the desk.

It was hardly necessary to keep my eyes open to see the lurking figure over beyond the easy-chairs, which started galvanically as we passed through the court, and a moment later came sidling after us. Little Pete had left my machine at the Market Street entrance—Worth was to drive me—and we wheeled away from a disappointed man racing for the taxi line around the corner.

"More power to his legs," Worth said.

"Oh, I don't know," I grunted as we cut into Montgomery, negotiated the corner onto Bush Street's clear way, striking a fair clip at once. "That end of him already works better than the other. How did you get wise?"

"Barbara Wallace telephoned me to look out for him," he smiled, and let my car out another notch once we'd passed the traffic cop at Kearny.

I myself had foreseen the possibility—but only as a possibility—that Dykeman would put a man on Worth's coat-tails, since I knew Dykeman and had been at that bank meeting; yet I had not regarded it as likely enough to warn Worth; and here was this girl phoning him to look out for a trailer. Was this some more of her deductive reasoning, or had Cummings dropped a hint?

She was waiting for us in front of the Haight Street boarding house that served her for a home, and we tucked her between us on the roadster's wide seat. At the St. Dunstan we found my man, left there since the hour of the alarm the day before, and everybody belonging to the management surly and glum. The clerk handed me Clayte's key across the morning papers spread out on his desk. Apartment houses dislike notoriety of this sort, and the St. Dunstan set up to be as rabidly respectable, as chemically pure as any in the city. Well, no use their blaming me; Clayte was their misfortune; they couldn't expect me to keep the matter out of print entirely.

The three of us crowded into the automatic elevator, and I pressed the seventh floor button. The girl's eyes shone under the wisp of veil twisted around a knowing little turban. She liked the taste of the adventure.

"That man came this way—with that suitcase," she breathed, "—maybe set it down right there when he pressed the button—just as Mr. Boyne did now!"

It was a fine morning; the shades had been left up, and Clayte's room when I opened the door was ablaze with sunlight.

"How delightful!" Barbara Wallace stopped on the threshold and looked about her. I expected the scientific investigating to begin; but no—she was all taken up with the beauty of sunlight and view.

The seventh was the top floor. The St. Dunstan stood almost at the summit where Nob Hill slants obliquely to north and east, and Powell Street dizzies down the steep descent to North Beach and the Bay. The girl had run to a window, and was looking out toward the marvelous show of blue-green water and distant Berkeley hills.

"Will you open this window for me, please?" she asked. I stepped to her side, forestalling Worth who was eyeing the room's interior with curiosity.

"You'll notice the burglar-proof sash locks," I said as I manipulated this one. She gave only casual interest, her attention still on the view beyond. The steel latch, fastened to the upper sash, locked into the socket on the lower sash by a lever-catch. "See? I must pull out this little lever before I can push the hasp back with my thumb—so. Now the window may be shoved up," and I illustrated.

"Yes," she nodded; then, "Look at the wisps of fog around Tamalpais's top. Worth, come here and see the violet shadows of the clouds on the bay."

"North wind coming up," agreed Worth, stepping to the farther window.

"It's bringing in the fog," she said; then abruptly, giving me the first hint that little Miss Wallace considered herself on the job, "Will it not latch by itself if you jam it shut hard?"

"It will not." I illustrated with a bang. The latch still remained open. "I must close it by hand." I pushed the hasp into the keeper, and, snap—the lever shot back and it was fast.

"But a window like that couldn't be opened from outside, even without the locking lever," she remarked, gazing again toward the Marin shore.

"A man with the know—a burglar—can open the ordinary window latch in less than a minute," I told her. "With a jimmy pinched between the sash and the sill, a recurring pressure starts the latch back; nothing to hold it. This—unless he cuts the glass—is burglar-proof."

Worth, at her shoulder, now looked down the sheer descent which exaggerated the seven stories of the St. Dunstan; because of its crowning position on the hill and the intersection of streets, we looked over the roofs of the houses before us, far above their chimney tops. I caught his eye and grinned across the girl's head, suggesting,

"Besides, we weren't trying to find how some one could break into this room, but how they could break out. Even if the latches had not been locked, there wouldn't be an answer in these windows—unless Clayte could fly."

"Might have climbed from one window ledge to the next and so made his way to the fire-escape," Worth said, but I shook my head.

"He'd be seen from the windows by the tenants on six floors—and nobody saw him. Might as well take the elevator or the stairs—which he didn't."

But the girl wasn't listening to any of this. Her expression attentive, alert, she was passing her hand around the edge of the glass of either sash, as though she still dwelt on my suggestion of cutting the pane; and as we watched her, she murmured to herself,

"Yes, flying would be a good way." It made me laugh.

And then she turned away from the windows and had no more interest in any of them, going with me all over the rest of the room with rather the air of a person who thought of renting it than a high-brow criminal investigator hunting clews.

"He lived here—years, you say?" I nodded. She slid her hand over the plush cushions of a morris chair, threw back the covers of an iron bed in one corner and felt of the mattress, then went and stood before the bare little dresser. "Why, the place expresses no more personality than a room in a transient hotel!"

"He hadn't any personality," I growled, and got the flicker of a smile from her eye.

"What about those library books he carried in the suitcase?" Worth came in with an echo from the bank meeting.

"Some more bunk," I said morosely. "So far we've not been able to locate him as a patron of any public or private library, and the hotel clerk's sure his mail never contained a correspondence course—in fact, neither here nor at the bank can any one remember his getting any mail. If he ever carried books in that suitcase as Knapp believed, it was several years back."

"Several years back," Miss Wallace repeated low.

"Myself, I've given up the idea of his studying. This crime doesn't look to me like any sudden temptation of a model bank clerk, spending his spare hours over correspondence courses. I rather expect to find him just plain crook."

"Oh, no," the girl objected. "It's too big and too well done to have been planned by a dull, commonplace crook."

"Right you are," I agreed, with restored good humor. "A keen brain planned this, but not Clayte's. There had to be an instrument—and that was Clayte—also, likely, one or more to help in the getaway."

The getaway! That brought us back with a thump to the present moment. Our pretty girl had been all over the shop now, glanced into bathroom, closet and cupboard, noted abandoned hats, clothing and shoes, the electric plate where Clayte got his breakfast coffee and toast, asked without much interest where he ate his other meals, and nodded agreeingly when she found that he'd been only an occasional customer at the neighboring restaurants, never regular, apparently eating here and there down-town. She seemed to get something out of that; what I didn't know.

"You speak of this crime not being committed on impulse," she turned to me at length. "How long ahead should you say he planned it?"

"Or had it planned and prepared for him," I reminded her.

"Well, that, then," she conceded with slight impatience. "How long do you think it might have been planned or prepared for? Years?"

"Hardly that. Not more than a year probably. A gang like this wouldn't hold together on a proposition for many months."

The black brows over those clear, childlike eyes, puckered a bit. I saw she wasn't at all satisfied with what I had said.

"Made all the observations you want to, Bobs?" Worth asked.

"All here. I want to see the roof." She gave us rather a mechanical smile as she silently ticked her points off on her fingers, appealing to me with, "I'm depending upon you for such facts as I have been unable to observe for myself, so if you give me wrong facts—make mistakes—I'll make mistakes in deduction."

There was such confidence in her deductive abilities that a tinge of irony crept into my tones as I replied,

"I'll be very careful what opinions I hold."

"I don't mind the opinions," this astounding young woman took me up gaily. "I never have any of my own, so I don't pay attention to anybody else's. But *do* be careful of your facts!"

"I'll try to," was all I said. Worth cut in with,

"Do you consider the roof another fact, Bobs?"

"I hope to find facts there," she answered promptly.

"Remember," I said, "your theory means another man up there, and you haven't yet—"

"Please, Mr. Boyne, don't take two and two and make five of them at this stage of the game," she checked me hastily, and I left them together while I made a hurried survey of the hall ceilings, looking for the scuttle. There was no hatchway in view, so I started down to the clerk to make inquiry. As I passed Clayte's open door, Miss Wallace seemed to be adjusting her turban before the dresser mirror, while Worth waited impatiently.

"Just a minute," I called. "I'll be right back," and I ducked into the elevator.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE ROOF

WHEN I returned with a key and the information that the way to the roof ran through the janitor's tool-room at the far end of the hall, I found my young people already out there. Worth was trying the tool-room door.

"Got the key?" he called. "It's locked."

"Yes." I took my time fitting and turning it. "How did you know this was the room?"

"I didn't," briefly. "Bobs walked out here, and I followed her. She said we'd want into this one."

She'd guessed right again! I wheeled on her, ejaculating,

"For the love of Mike! Tell a mere man how you deduced this stairway. Feminine intuition, I suppose."

I hadn't meant to be offensive with that last, but her firm little chin was in the air as she countered,

"Is it a stairway? It might be a ladder, you know."

It was a ladder, an iron ladder, as I found when I ushered them in. My eyes snapped inquiry at her.

"Very simple," she said. Worth was pushing aside pails and boxes to make a better way for her to the ladder's foot. "There wouldn't be a roof scuttle in the rented rooms, so I knew when you called in to tell us there was none in the halls."

"I didn't. I said nothing of the sort." Where was the girl's fine memory that she couldn't recollect a man's words for the little time I'd been gone! "All I said was, 'Just a minute and I'll be back.' "

"Yes, that's all you said to Worth." She glanced at the boy serenely as he waited for her at the ladder's foot. "He's not a trained observer; he doesn't deduce even from what he does observe." There were twinkling lights in her black eyes. "But what your hurried trip to the office said to me was that you'd gone for the key of the room that led to the roof-scuttle."

Well, that was reasonable—simple enough, too; but, "This room? How did you find it?"

She stepped to the open door and placed the tip of a gloved finger on the nickeled naught that marked the panels.

"The significant zero again, Mr. Boyne," she laughed. "Here it means the room is not a tenanted one, and is therefore the way to the roof. Shall we go there?"

"Well, young lady," I said as I led her along the trail Worth had cleared, "it must be almost as bad to see everything that way—in minute detail—as to be blind."

"Carry on!" Worth called from the top of the ladder, reaching down to aid the girl. She laughed back at me as she started the short climb.

"Not at all bad! You others seem to me only half awake to what is about you—only half living," and she placed her hand in the strong one held down to her. As Worth passed her through the scuttle to the roof, I saw her glance carelessly at the hooks and staples, the clumsy but adequate arrangement for locking the hatch, and, following her, gave them more careful attention, wondering what she had seen—plenty that I did not, no doubt. They had no tale to tell my eyes.

Once outside, she stopped a minute with Worth to adjust herself to the sharp wind which swept across from the north. Here was a rectangular space surrounded by walls which ran around its four sides to form the coping, unbroken in any spot; a gravel-and-tar roof, almost flat, with the scuttle and a few small, dust covered skylights its only openings, four chimney-tops its sole projections. It was bare of any hiding-place, almost as clear as a tennis court.

We made a solemn tour of inspection; I wasn't greatly interested—how could I be, knowing that between this roof and my fugitive there had been locked windows, and a locked door under reliable human eyes? Still, the lifelong training of the detective kept me estimating the possibilities of a getaway from the roof—if Clayte could have reached it. Worth crossed to where the St. Dunstan fire escape came up from the ground to end below us at a top floor window. I joined him, explaining as we looked down,

"Couldn't have made it that way; not by daylight. In open view all around."

"Think he stayed up here till dark?" Worth suggested, quite as though the possibility of Clayte's coming here at all was settled.

"My men were all over this building—roof to cellar—within the hour. They'd not have overlooked a crack big enough for him to hide in. Put yourself in Clayte's place. Time was the most valuable thing in the world with him right then. If ever he got up to this roof, he'd not waste a minute longer on it than he had to."

"Let's see what's beyond, then," and Worth led the way to the farther end.

The girl didn't come with us. Having been once around the roof coping, looking, it seemed to me, as much at the view as anything else, she now seemed content to settle herself on a little square of planking, a disused scuttle top or something of the sort, in against one of the chimneys where she was sheltered from the wind. Rather to my surprise, I saw her thoughtfully pulling off her gloves, removing her turban, all the time with a curiously disinterested air. I was reminded of what Worth had said the night before about the way her father trained her. Probably she regarded the facts I'd furnished her, or that she'd picked up for herself, much as she used to the problems in concentration her father spread in the high chair tray of her infancy. I turned and left her with them, for Worth was calling me to announce a fact I already knew, that the adjoining building had a roof some fifteen feet below where we stood, and that the man, admitting good gymnastic ability, might have reached it.

"Sure," I said. "But come on. We're wasting time here."

We turned to go, and then stopped, both of us checked instantly by what we saw. The girl was sitting in a strange pose, her feet drawn in to cross beneath her body, slender hands at the length of the arms meeting with interlaced finger-tips before her, the thumbs just touching; shoulders back, chin up, eyes—big enough at any time, now dilated to look twice their size—velvet circles in a white face. Like a Buddha; I'd seen her sit so, years before, an under-sized girl doing stunts for her father in a public hall; and even then she'd been in a way impressive. But now, in the fullness of young beauty, her fine head relieved against the empty blue of the sky, the free winds whipping loose flying ends of her dark hair, she held the eye like a miracle.

Sitting here so immovably, she looked to me as though life had slid away from her for the moment, the mechanical action of lungs and heart temporarily suspended, so that mind might work unhindered in that beautiful shell. No, I was wrong. She was breathing; her bosom rose and fell in slow but deep, placid inhalations and exhalations. And the pale face might be from the slower heart-beat, or only because the surface blood had receded to give more of strength to the brain.

The position of head of a Bankers' Security Agency carries with it a certain amount of dignity—a dignity which, since Richardson's death, I have maintained better than I have handled other requirements of the business he left with me. I stood now feeling like a fool. I'd grown gray in the work, and here in my prosperous middle life, a boy's whim and a girl's pretty face had put me in the position of consulting a clairvoyant. Worse, for this was a wild-cat affair, without even the professional standing of establishments to which I knew some of the weak brothers in my line sometimes sneaked for ghostly counsel. If it should leak out, I was done for.

I suppose I sort of groaned, for I felt Worth put a restraining hand on my arm, and heard his soft,

"Psst!"

The two of us stood, how long I can't say, something besides the beauty of the young creature, even the dignity of her in this outré situation getting hold of me, so that I was almost reverent when at last the rigidity of her image-like figure began to relax, the pretty feet in their silk stockings and smart pumps appeared where they belonged, side by side on the edge of the planking, and she looked at us with eyes that slowly gathered their normal expression, and a smile of rare human sweetness.

"It *is* horrid to see—and I loathe doing it!" She shook her curly dark head like a punished child, and stayed a minute longer, eyes downcast, groping after gloves and hat. "I thought maybe I'd get the answer before you saw me—sitting up like a trained seal!"

"Like a mighty pretty little heathen idol, Bobs," Worth amended.

"Well, it's the only way I can really concentrate—effectively. But this is the first time I've done it since—since father died."

"And never again for me, if that's the way you feel about it." Worth crossed quickly and stood beside her, looking down. She reached a hand to him; her eyes thanked him; but as he helped her to her feet I was struck by a something poised and confident that she seemed to have brought with her out of that strange state in which she had just been.

"Doesn't either of you want to hear the answer?" she asked. Then, without waiting for reply, she started for the scuttle and the ladder, bare headed, carrying her hat. We found her once more adjusting turban and veil before the mirror of Clayte's dresser. She faced around, and announced, smiling steadily across at me, "Your man Clayte left this room while Mrs. Griggsby was kneeling almost on its threshold—left it by that window over there. He got to the roof by means of a rope and grappling hook. He tied the suitcase to the lower end of the rope, swung it out of the window, went up hand over hand, and pulled the suitcase up after him. That's the answer I got."

It was? Well, it was a beaut! Only Worth Gilbert, standing there giving the proceeding respectability by careful attention and a grave face, brought me down to asking with mild jocularity,

"He did? He did all that? Well, please ma'am, who locked the window after him?"

"He locked the window after himself."

"Oh, say!" I began in exasperation—hadn't I just shown the impractical little creature that those locks couldn't be manipulated from outside?

"Wait. Examine carefully the wooden part of the upper sash, at the lock—again," she urged, but without making any movement to help. "You'll find what we overlooked before; the way he locked the sash from the outside."

I turned to the window and looked where she had said; nothing. I ran my fingers over the painted surface of the wood, outside, opposite the latch, and a queer, chilly feeling went down my spine. I jerked out my knife, opened it and scraped at a tiny inequality.

"There is—is something—" I was beginning, when Worth crowded in at my side and pushed his broad shoulders out the window to get a better view of my operations, then commanded,

"Let me have that knife." He took it from my fingers, dug with its blade, and suddenly from the inside I saw a tiny hole appear in the frame of the sash beside the lock hasp. "Here we are!" He brought his upper half back into the room and held up a wooden plug, painted—dipped in paint—the exact color of the sash. It had concealed a hole; pierced the wood from out to in.

"And she saw that in her trance," I murmured, gaping in amazement at the plug.

I heard her catch her breath, and Worth scowled at me,

"Trance? What do you mean, Boyne? She doesn't go into a trance."

"That—that—whatever she does," I corrected rather helplessly.

"Never mind, Mr. Boyne," said the girl. "It isn't clairvoyance or anything like that, however it looks."

"But I wouldn't have believed any human eyes could have found that thing. I discovered it only by sense of touch—and that after you told me to hunt for it. You saw it when I was showing you the latch, did you?"

"Oh, I didn't see it." She shook her head. "I found it when I was sitting up there on the roof."

"Guessed at it?"

"I never guess." Indignantly. "When I'd cleared my mind of everything else—had concentrated on just the facts that bore on what I wanted to know—how that man with the suitcase got out of the room and left it locked behind him—I deduced the hole in the sash by elimination."

"By elimination?" I echoed. "Show me."

"Simple as two and two," she assented. "Out of the door? No; Mrs. Griggsby; so out of the window. Down? No; you told why; he would be seen; so, up. Ladder? No; too big for one man to handle or to hide; so a rope."

"But the hole in the sash?"

"You showed me the only way to close that lock from the outside. There was no hole in the glass, so there must be in the sash. It was not visible—you had been all over it, and a man of your profession isn't a totally untrained observer—so the hole was plugged. I hadn't seen the plug, so it was concealed by paint—"

I was trying to work a toothpick through the plughole. She offered me a wire hairpin, straightened out, and with it I pushed the hasp into place from outside, saw the lever snap in to hold it fast. I had worked the catch as Clayte had worked it—from outside.

"How did you know it was *this* window?" I asked, forced to agree that she had guessed right as to the sash lock. "There are two more here, either of which—"

"No, please, Mr. Boyne. Look at the angle of the roof that cuts from view any one climbing from this window—not from the others."

We were all leaning in the window now, sticking our heads out, looking down, looking up.

"I can't yet see how you get the rope and hook," I said. "Still seems to me that an outside man posted on the roof to help in the getaway is more likely."

"Maybe. I can't deal with things that are merely likely. It has to be a fact—or nothing—for my use. I know that there wasn't any second man because of the nicks Clayte's grappling hook has left in the cornice up there."

"Nicks!" I said, and stood like a bound boy at a husking, without a word to say for myself. Of course, in this impasse of the locked windows, my men and I had had some excuse for our superficial examination of the roof. Yet that she should have seen what we had passed over—seen it out of the corner of her eye, and be laughing at me—was rather a dose to swallow. She'd got her hair and her hat and veil to her liking, and she prompted us,

"So now you want to get right down stairs—don't you—and go up through that other building to its roof?"

I stared. She had my plan almost before I had made it.

At the St. Dunstan desk where I returned the keys, little Miss Wallace had a question of her own to put to the clerk.

"How long ago was this building reroofed?" she asked with one of her dark, softly glowing smiles.

"Reroofed?" repeated the puzzled clerk, much more civil to her than he had been to me. "I don't know that it ever was. Certainly not in my time, and I've been here all of four years."

"Not in four years? You're sure?"

"Sure of that, yes, miss. But I can find exactly." The fellow behind the desk was rising with an eagerness to be of service to her, when she cut him short with,

"Thank you. Four years would be exact enough for my purpose." And she followed a puzzled detective and, if I may guess, an equally wondering Worth Gilbert out into the street.

CHAPTER VII

THE GOLD NUGGET

THE neighbor to the south of the St. Dunstan was the Gold Nugget Hotel, a five story brick building and not at all pretentious as a hostelry. I knew the place mildly, and my police training, even better than such acquaintance as I had with this particular dump, told me what it was. Through the windows we could see guests, Sunday papers littered about them, half smoked cigars in their faces, and hats which had a general tendency to tilt over the right eye. And here suddenly I realized the difference between Miss Barbara Wallace, a scientist's daughter, and some feminine sleuth we might have had with us.

"Take her back to the St. Dunstan, Worth," I suggested. Then, as I saw they were both going to resist, "She can't go in here. I'll wait for you if you like."

"Don't know why we shouldn't let Bobs in on the fun, same as you and me, Jerry." That was the way Worth put it. I took a side glance at his attitude in this affair—that he'd bought and was enjoying an eight hundred thousand dollar frolic, offering to share it with a friend; and saying no more, I wheeled and swung open the door for them. The man at the desk looked at me, calling a quick,

"Hello, Jerry—what's up?"

"Hello, Kite. How'd you come here?"

The Kite as a hotelman was a new one on me. Last I knew of him, he was in the business of making book at the Emeryville track; and I supposed—if I ever thought of him—that he'd followed the ponies south across the border. As I stepped close to the counter, he spoke low, his look one of puzzled and somewhat anxious inquiry.

"Running straight, Jerry. You may ask the Chief. What can I do for you?"

Rather glad of the luck that gave me an old acquaintance to deal with, I told him, described Clayte, Worth and Miss Wallace standing by listening; then asked if Kite had seen him pass through the hotel going out the previous day at some time around one o'clock, carrying a brown, sole leather suitcase.

The readers of the Sunday papers who had been lured from their known standards of good manners into the sending of sundry interested glances in the direction of our sparkling girl, took the cue from the Kite's scowl to bury themselves for good in the voluminous sheets they held, each attending strictly to his own business, as is the etiquette of places like the Gold Nugget.

"About one o'clock, you say?" Kite muttered, frowning, twisted his head around and called down a back passage, "Louie—Oh, Louie!" and when an overalled porter, rather messy, shuffled to the desk, put the low toned query, "D'you see any stranger guy gripping a sole leather shirt-box snoop by out yestiddy, after one, thereabouts?" And I added the information, "Medium height and weight, blue eyes, light brown hair, smooth face."

Louie looked at me dubiously.

"How big a guy?" he asked.

"Five feet seven or eight; weighs about hundred and forty."

"Blue eyes you say?"

"Light blue—gray blue."

"How was he tucked up?"

"Blue serge suit, black shoes, black derby. Neat, quiet dresser."

Louie's eyes wandered over the guests in the office questioningly. I began to feel impatient. If there was any place in the city where my description of Clayte would differentiate him, make him noticeable by comparison, it was here. Neat, quiet dressers were not dotting this lobby.

"Might be Tim Foley?" he appealed to the Kite, who nodded gravely and chewed his short mustache. "Would he have a big scar on his left cheek?"

"He would not," I said shortly. "He wasn't a guest here, and you don't know him. Get this straight now: a stranger, going through here, out; about one o'clock; carried a suitcase."

"Bulls after him?" Louie asked, and I turned away from him wearily.

"Kite," I said, "let me up to your roof."

"Sure, Jerry." Released, the porter went on to gather up a pile of discarded papers.

"Could he—the man I've described—come through here—through this office and neither you nor Louie see him?" I asked. The Kite brought a box of cigars from under the counter with, "My treat, gentlemen. Naw, Jerry; sure not—not that kind of a guy. Louie'd 'a' spotted him. Most observing cuss I ever seen."

Miss Wallace, taking all this in, seemed amused. As I turned to lead to the elevator I found that again she wanted a question of her own answered.

"Mr. Kite," she began and I grinned; Kite wasn't the Kite's surname or any part of his name; "Who is the guest here with the upstairs room—on the top floor—has had the same room right along—for five or six years—but doesn't—"

"Go easy, ma'am, please!" Kite's little eyes were popping; he dragged out a handkerchief and fumbled it around his forehead. "I've not been here for any five or six years—no, nor half that time. Since I've been here most of our custom is transient. Nobody don't keep no room five or six years in the Gold Nugget."

"Back up," I smiled at his excitement. "To my certain knowledge Steve Skeels has had a room here longer than that. Hasn't he been with you ever since the place was rebuilt after the earthquake?"

"Steve?" the Kite repeated. "I forgot him. Yeah —he keeps a little room up under the roof."

"Has he had it for as long as four years?" the young lady asked.

"Search me," the Kite shook his head.

But Louie the overalled, piloting us the first stage of our journey in a racketty old elevator that he seemed to pull up by a cable, so slow it was, grumbled an assent to the same question when it was put to him, and confirmed my belief that Skeels came into the hotel as soon as it was rebuilt, and had kept the same room ever since.

Miss Wallace seemed interested in this; but all the time we were making the last lap, by an iron stairway, to that roof-house we had seen from the top of the St. Dunstan; all the time Louie was unlocking the door there to let us out, instructing us to be sure to relock it and bring him the key, and to yell for him down the elevator shaft because the bell was busted, the quiet smile of Miss Barbara Wallace disturbed me. She followed where I led, but I had the irritating impression that she looked on at my movements, and Worth's as well, with the indulgent eye of a grown-up observing children at play.

On the roof of the Gold Nugget we picked up the possible trail easily; Clayte hadn't needed to go through the building, or have a confederate staked out in a room here, to make a downward getaway. For here the fire escape came all the way up, curving over the coping to anchor into the wall, and it was a good iron stairway, with landings at each floor, and a handrail the entire length, its lower end in the alley between Powell and Mason Streets. Looking at it I didn't doubt that it was used by the guests of the Gold Nugget at least half as much as the easier but more conspicuous front entrance. Therefore a man seen on it would be no more likely to attract attention than he would in the elevator. I explained this to the others, but Worth had attacked a rack of old truck piled in the corner of the roof-house, and paid little attention to me, while Miss Wallace nodded with her provoking smile and said,

"Once—yes; no doubt you are exactly right. I wasn't looking for a way that a man might take once, under pressure of great necessity."

"Why not?" I countered. "If Clayte got away by this means yesterday—that'll do me."

"It might," she nodded, "if you could see it as a fact, without seeing a lot more. Such a man as Clayte was—a really wonderful man, you know—" the dimples were deep in the pink of her cheeks as she flashed a laughing look at me with this clawful—"a really wonderful man like Clayte," she repeated, "wouldn't have trusted to a route he hadn't known and proved for a long time."

"That's theory," I smiled. "I take my hat off to you, Miss Wallace, when it comes to observing and deducing, but I'm afraid your theorizing is weak."

"I never theorize," she reminded me. "All I deal with is facts."

She had perched herself on an overturned box, and was watching Worth sort junk. I leaned against the roof-house, pushed Kite's donated cigar unlighted into a corner of my mouth and stared at her.

"Miss Wallace," I said sharply, "what's this Steve Skeels stuff? What's this reroofing stuff? What's the dope you think you have, and you think I haven't? Tell us, and we'll not waste time. Tell us, and we'll get ahead on this case. Worth, let that rubbish alone. Nothing there for us. Come here and listen."

For all answer he straightened up, looked at us without a word—and went to it again. I turned to the girl.

"Worth doesn't need to listen to me, Mr. Boyne," she said serenely. "He already has full faith in me and my methods."

"Methods be—be blowed!" I exploded. "It's results that count, and you've produced. I'm willing to hand it to you. All we know now, we got from you. Beside you I'm a thick-headed blunderer. Let me in on how you get things and I wont be so hard to convince."

"Indeed, you aren't a blunderer," she said warmly. "You do a lot better than most people at observing." (High praise that, for a detective more than twenty years in the business; but she meant to be complimentary.) "I'm glad to tell you my processes. How much time do you want to give to it?"

"Not a minute longer than will get what you know." And she began with a rush.

"Those dents in the coping at the St. Dunstan, above Clayte's window—I asked the clerk there how long since the building had been reroofed, because there were nicks made by that hook and half filled with tar that had been slushed up against the coping and into the lowest dents. You see what that means?"

"That Clayte—or some accomplice of his—had been using the route more than four years ago. Yes."

"And the other scars were made at varying times, showing me that coming over here from there was quite a regular thing."

"At that rate he would have nicked the coping until it would have looked like a huck towel," I objected.

"A huck towel," she gravely adopted my word. "But he was a man that did everything he did several different ways. That was his habit—a sort of disguise. That's why he was shadowy and hard to describe. Sometimes he came up to the St. Dunstan roof just as we did; and once, a good while ago, there were cleats on that wall there so he could climb down here without the rope. They have been taken away some time, and the places where they were are weathered over so you would hardly notice them."

"Right you are," I said feelingly. "I'd hardly notice them. If I could notice things as you do—fame and fortune for me!" I thought the matter over for a minute. "That lodger on the top floor, Steve Skeels," I debated. "A poor bet. Yet—after all, he might have been a member of the gang, though somehow I don't get the hunch—"

"What sort of looking person was this man Skeels?" she asked.

"Quiet fellow. Dressed like a church deacon. 'Silent Steve' they call him. I'll send for him down stairs and let you give him the once-over if you like."

"Oh, that's not the kind of man I'm looking for." She shook her head. "My man would be more like those down there in the easy chairs—so he wasn't noticed in the elevator or when he passed out through the office."

"Wasn't it cute of him?" I grinned. "But you see we've just heard that he didn't take the elevator and go through the office—Saturday anyhow, which is the only time that really counts for us, the time when he carried that suitcase with a fortune in it."

"But he did," she persisted. "He went that way. He walked out the front door and carried away the suitcase—"

"He didn't!" Worth shouted, and began throwing things behind him like a terrier in a wood-rat's burrow.

Derelict stuff of all sorts; empty boxes, pasteboard cartons, part of an old trunk, he hurtled them into a heap, and dragged out a square something in a gunny sack. As he jerked to clear it from the sacking, I glanced at little Miss Wallace. She wasn't getting any pleasureable kick out of the situation. Her eyes seemed to go wider open with a sort of horror, her face paled as she drooped in on herself, sitting there on the box. Then Worth held up his find in triumph, assuming a famous attitude.

"The world is mine!" he cried.

"Maybe 'tis, maybe 'tisn't," I said as I ran across to look at the thing close. Sure enough, he'd dug up a respectable brown, sole leather suitcase with brass trimmings such as a bank clerk might have carried, suspiciously much too good to have been thrown out here. Could it be that the thieves had indeed met in one of the Gold Nugget's rooms or in the roof-house up here, made their divvy, split the swag, and thus clumsily disposed of the container? At the moment, Worth tore buckles and latches free, yanked the thing open, reversed it in air—and out fell a coiled rope that curved itself like a snake—a three-headed snake; the triple grappling iron at its end standing up as though to hiss.

We all stood staring; I was too stunned to be triumphant. What a pat confirmation of Miss Wallace's deductions! I turned to congratulate her and at the same instant Worth cried,

"What's the matter, Bobs?" for the girl was sitting, staring dejectedly, her chin cupped in her palms, her lips quivering. Nonplussed, I stooped over the suitcase and rope, coiling up the one, putting it in the other —this first bit of tangible, palpable evidence we'd lighted on.

"Let's get out of this," I said quickly. "We've done all we can here—and good and plenty it is, too."

Worth took the suitcase out of my hands and carried it, so that I had to help Miss Wallace down the ladder. She still looked as though she'd lost her last friend. I couldn't make her out. Never a word from her while we were getting down, or while they waited and I shouted for Louie. It was in the elevator, with the porter looking at everything on earth but this suitcase we hadn't brought in and we were taking out, that she said, hardly above her breath,

"Shall you ask at the desk if this ever belonged to any one in the house?"

"Find out here—right now," and I turned to the man in overalls with, "How about it?"

"Not that your answer will make any difference," Worth cut in joyously. "Nobody need get the idea that they can take this suitcase away from me—'cause they can't. It's mine. I paid eight hundred thousand dollars for this box; and I've got a use for it." He chuckled. Louie regarded him with uncomprehending toleration—queer doings were the order of the day at the Gold Nugget—and allowed negligently.

"You'll get to keep it. It don't belong here." Then, as a coin changed hands, "Thank *you.*"

"But didn't it ever belong here?" our girl persisted forlornly, and when Louie failed her, jingling Worth's tip in his calloused palm, she wanted the women asked, and we had a frowsy chambermaid called who denied any acquaintance with our sole leather discovery, insisting, upon definite inquiry, that she had never seen it in Skeels' room, or any other room of her domain. Little Miss Wallace sighed and dropped the subject.

As we stepped out of the elevator, I behind the others, Kite caught my attention with a low whistle, and in response to a furtive, beckoning, backward jerk of his head, I moved over to the desk. The reading gentlemen in the easy chairs, most consciously unconscious of us, sent blue smoke circles above their papers. Kite leaned far over to get his mustache closer to my ear.

"You ast me about Steve," he whispered.

"Yeah," I agreed, and looked around for Barbara, to tell her here was her chance to meet the gentleman she had so cleverly deduced. But she and Worth were already getting through the door, he still clinging to the suitcase, she trailing along with that expression of defeat. "I'm sort of looking up Steve. And you don't want to tip him off—see?"

"Couldn't if I wanted to, Jerry," the Kite came down on his heels, but continued to whisper hoarsely. "Steve's bolted."

"What?"

"Bolted," the Kite repeated. "Hopped the twig. Jumped the town."

"You mean he's not in his room?" I reached for a match in the metal holder, scratched it, and lit my cigar.

"I mean he's jumped the town," Kite repeated. "You got me nervous asking for him that way. While you was on the roof, I took a squint around and found he was gone—with his hand baggage. That means he's gone outa town."

"Not if the suitcase you squinted for was a brown sole leather—" I was beginning, but the Kite cut in on me.

"I seen that one you had. That wasn't it. His was a brand new one, black and shiny."

Suddenly I couldn't taste my cigar at all.

"Know what time to-day he left here?" I asked.

"It wasn't to-day. 'Twas yestiddy. About one o'clock."

As I plunged for the door I was conscious of his hoarse whisper following me,

"What's Steve done, Jerry? What d'ye want him for?"

I catapulted across the sidewalk and into the machine.

"Get me to my office as fast as you can, Worth," I exclaimed. "Hit Bush Street—and rush it."

CHAPTER VIII

A TIN-HORN GAMBLER

AFTER we were in the machine, my head was so full of the matter in hand that Worth had driven some little distance before I realized that the young people were debating across me as to which place we went first, Barbara complaining that she was hungry, while Worth ungallantly eager to give his own affairs immediate attention, argued,

"You said the dining-room out at your diggings would be closed by this time. Why not let me take you down to the Palace, along with Jerry, have this suitcase safely locked up, and we can all lunch together and get ahead with our talk."

"Drive to the office, Worth," I cut in ahead of Barbara's objections to this plan. "I ought to be there this minute. We'll have a tray in from a little joint that feeds me when I'm too busy to go out for grub."

I took them straight into my private office at the end of the suite.

"Make yourself comfortable," I said to Miss Wallace. "Better let me lock up that suitcase, Worth; stick it in the vault. That's evidence."

"I'll hang on to it." He grinned. "You can keep the rope and hook. This has got another use before it can be evidence."

Not even delaying to remove my coat, I laid a heavy finger on the buzzer button for Roberts, my secretary; then as nothing resulted, I played music on the other signal tips beneath the desk lid. It was Sunday, also luncheon hour, but there must be some one about the place. It never was left entirely empty.

My fugue work brought little Pete, and Murray, one of the men from the operatives' room.

"Where's Roberts?" I asked the latter.

"He went to lunch, Mr. Boyne."

"Where's Foster?" Foster was chief operative.

"He telephoned in from Redwood City half an hour ago. Chasing a Clayte clue down the peninsula."

"If he calls up again, tell him to report in at once. Is there a stenographer about?"

"Not a one; Sunday, you know."

"Can you take dictation?"

"Me? Why, no, sir."

"Then dig me somebody who can. And rush it. I've—"

"Perhaps I might help." It was little Miss Wallace who spoke; about the first cheerful word I'd heard out of her since we found that suitcase on the roof of the Gold Nugget. "I can take on the machine fairly."

"Fine!" I tossed my coat on the big center table. "Murray, send Roberts to me as soon as he comes in. You take number two trunk line, and find two of the staff—quick; any two. Shoot them to the Gold Nugget Hotel." I explained the situation in a word. Then, as he was closing the door, "Keep off Number One trunk, Murray; I'll be using that line," and I turned to little Pete.

"Get lunch for three," I said, handing him a bill. From his first glance at Barbara one could have seen that the monkey was hers truly, as they say at the end of letters. I knew as he bolted out that he felt something very special ought to be dug up for such a visitor.

The girl had shed coat and hat and was already fingering the keys of the typewriter, trying their touch. I saw at once she knew her business, and I turned to the work at hand with satisfaction.

"You'll find telegram blanks there somewhere," I instructed. "Get as many in for manifold copies as you can make readable. The long form. Worth—"

I looked around to find that my other amateur assistant was following my advice, stowing his precious suitcase in the vault; and it struck me that he couldn't have been more tickled with the find if the thing had contained all the money and securities instead of that rope and hook. He had made the latter into a separate package, and now looked up at me with,

"Want this in here, too, Jerry?"

"I do. Lock them both up, and come take the telephone at the table there. Press down Number One button. Then call every taxi stand in the city (find their numbers at the back of the telephone directory) and ask if they picked up Silent Steve at or near the Gold Nugget yesterday afternoon about one; Steve Skeels—or any other man. If so, where'd they take him? Get me?"

"All hunk, Jerry." He came briskly to the job. I returned to Miss Wallace, with,

"Ready, Barbara?"

"Yes, Mr. Boyne."

"Take dictation:

" 'We offer five hundred dollars—' You authorize that, Worth?"

"Sure. What's it for?"

"Never mind. You keep at your job. 'Five hundred dollars for the arrest of Silent Steve Skeels—' Wait. Make that 'arrest or detention.' Got it?"

"All right, Mr. Boyne."

—" 'Skeels, gambler, who left San Francisco about one in the afternoon yesterday March sixth. Presumed he went by train; maybe by auto. He is man thirty-eight to forty; five feet seven or eight; weighs about one hundred forty. Hair, light brown; eyes light blue—' Make it gray-blue, Barbara."

Worth glanced up from where he was jotting down telephone numbers to drawl,

"You know who you're describing there?"

"Yes—Steve Skeels."

I saw Miss Wallace give him a quick look, a little shake of her head, as she said to me.

"Go on—please, Mr. Boyne."

" 'Hair parted high, smoothed down; appears of slight build but is well muscled. Neat dresser, quiet, usually wears blue serge suit, black derby hat, black shoes.' "

"By Golly—you see it now yourself, don't you, Jerry?"

"I see that you're holding up work," I said impatiently. And now it was the quiet girl who came in with.

"Who gave you this description of Steve Skeels?

I mean, how many people's observation of the man does this represent?"

"One. My own," I jerked out. "I know Skeels; have known him for years."

"Years? How many?" It was still the girl asking.

"Since 1907—or thereabouts."

"Was he always a gambler?" she wanted to know.

"Always. Ran a joint on Fillmore Street after the big earthquake, and before San Francisco came back downtown."

"A gambler," she spoke the word just above her breath, as though trying it out with herself. "A man who took big chances—risks."

"Not Steve," I smiled at her earnestness. "Steve was a piker always—a tin-horn gambler. Hid away from the police instead of doing business with them. Take a chance? Not Steve."

Worth had left the telephone and was leaning over her shoulder to read what she had typed.

"Exactly and precisely," he said, "the same words you had in that other fool description of him."

"Of whom?"

"Clayte."

Worth let me have the one word straight between the eyes, and I leaned back in my chair, the breath almost knocked out of me by it. By an effort I pulled myself together and turned to the girl:

"Take dictation, please: Skeel's eyes are wide apart, rather small but keen—"

And for the next few minutes I was making words mean something, drawing a picture of the Skeels I knew, so that others could visualize him. And it brought me a word of commendation from Miss Wallace, and made Worth exclaim,

"Sounds more like Clayte than Clayte himself. You've put flesh on those bones, Jerry."

"You keep busy at that phone and help land him," I growled. "Finish, please: 'Wire information to me. I hold warrant. Jeremiah Boyne, Bankers' Security Agency.' That's all."

The girl pulled the sheets from the machine and sorted them while I was stabbing the buzzer. Roberts answered, breezing in with an apology which I nipped.

"Never mind that. Get this telegram on the wires to each of our corresponding agencies as far east as Spokane, Ogden and Denver. Has Murray got in touch with Foster?"

"Not yet. Young and Stroud are outside."

"Send them to bring in Steve Skeels," I ordered. "Description on the telegram there. Any word, Worth?"

"Nothing yet." Worth was calling one after another of the taxi offices. Little Pete came in with a tray.

"All right, Worth," I said. "Turn that job over to Roberts. Here's where we eat."

The kid's idea of catering for Barbara was club sandwiches and pie à la mode. It wouldn't have been mine; but I was glad to note that he'd guessed right. The youngsters fell to with appetite. For myself, I ate, the receiver at my ear, talking between bites. San José, Stockton, Santa Rosa—in all the nearby towns of size, I placed the drag-net out for Silent Steve, tin-horn gambler.

They talked as they lunched. I didn't pay any attention to what they said now; my mind was racing at the new idea Worth had given me. So far, I had been running Skeels down as one of the same gang with Clayte; the man on the roof; the go-between for the getaway. My supposition was that when the suitcase was emptied for division, Skeels, being left to dispose of the container, had stuck it where we found it. But what if the thing worked another way? What if all the money—almost a round million—which came to the Gold Nugget roof in the brown sole-leather case, walked out of its front door in the new black shiny carrier of Skeels the gambler?

Could that be worked? A gambler at night, a bank employee by day? Why not? Improbable. But not impossible.

"I believe you said a mouthful, Worth," I broke in on the two at their lunch. "And tell me, girl, how did you get the idea of walking up to the desk at the Gold Nugget and demanding Steve Skeels from the Kite?"

"I didn't demand Steve Skeels," she reminded me rather plaintively. "I didn't want—him."

"What did you want?"

"A room that had been lived in."

She didn't need to add a word to that. I got her in the instant. That examination of hers in Clayte's room at the St. Dunstan; the crisp, new-looking bedding, the unworn velvet of the chair cushions; the faded nap of the carpet, quite perfect, while that in the hall had just been renewed. Even had the room been done over recently—and I knew it had not—there was no getting around the total absence of photographs, pictures, books, magazines, newspapers, old letters, the lack of all the half worn stuff that collects about an occupied apartment. No pinholes or defacements on the walls, none of the litter that accumulates. The girl was right; that room hadn't been lived in.

"Beautiful," I said in honest admiration. "It's a pleasure to see a mind like yours, and such powers of observation, in action, clicking out results like a perfectly adjusted machine. Clayte didn't live in his room because he lived with the gang all his glorious outside hours. There was where the poor rabbit of a bank clerk got his fling."

"Oh, yes, it works logically. He held himself down to Clayte at the St. Dunstan and in the bank, and he let himself go to—what?—outside of it, beyond it, where he really lived."

"He let himself go to Steve Skeels—won't that do you?"

"No," she said so positively that it was annoying. "That won't do me at all."

"But it's what you got," I reminded her rather unkindly, and then was sorry I'd done it. "It's what you got for me—and I thank you for it."

"You needn't," she came back at me—spunky little thing. "It isn't worth thanking anybody for. It's only a partial fact."

"And you think half truths are dangerous?" I smiled at her.

"There isn't any such thing," she instructed me. "Even *facts* can hardly be split into fractions; while the truth is always whole and complete."

"As far as you see it," I amended. "For instance, you insist on keeping the gang all under Clayte's hat—or you did at first. Now you're refusing to believe, as both Worth and I believe, that Steve Skeels is Clayte himself. I should think you'd jump at the idea. Here's your Wonder Man."

She leaned back in her chair and laughed. I was glad to hear the sound again, see the dimples flicker in her cheeks, even if she was laughing at me.

"A wonderful Wonder Man, Mr. Boyne," she said. "One who does things so bunglingly that you can follow him right up and put your hand on him."

"Not so I could," I reminded her gaily. "So you could. Quite a different matter." She took my compliment sweetly, but she said with smiling reluctance,

"I'm not in this, of course, except that your kindness allowed me to be for this day only. But if I were, I shouldn't be following Skeels as you are. I'd still be after Clayte."

"It foots up to the same thing," I said rather tartly.

"Oh, does it?" she laughed at me. "Two and two are making about three and a half this afternoon, are they?"

"What we've got to-day ought to land something," I maintained. "You've been fine help, Barbara—" and I broke off suddenly with the knowledge that I'd been calling her that all through the rush of the work.

"Thank you." She smiled inclusively. I knew she meant my use of her name as well as my commendation. I began clearing my desk preparatory to leaving. Worth was going to take her home and as he brought her coat, he spoke again of the suitcase.

"Hey, there!" I remonstrated, "You don't want to be lugging that thing with you everywhere, like a three-year-old kid that's found a dead cat. Leave it where it is."

"Give me an order for it then," he said. And when I looked surprised, "Might need that box, and you not be in the office."

"Need it?" I grumbled. "I'd like to know what for."

But I scribbled the order. Over by the window the young people were talking together earnestly; they made a picture against the light, standing close, the girl's vivid dark face raised, the lad's tall head bent, attentive.

"But, Bobs, you must get some time to play about," I heard Worth say.

"Awfully little," Her look up at him was like that of a wistful child.

"You said you were in the accounting department," he urged impatiently. "A lightning calculator like you could put that stuff through in about one tenth of the usual time."

"I use an adding machine," she half whispered, and it made me chuckle.

"An adding machine!" Worth exploded in a peal of laughter. "For Barbara Wallace! What's their idea?"

"It isn't their idea; it's mine," with dignity. "They don't know that I used to be a freak mathematician. I don't want them to. Father used to say that all children could be trained to do all that I did—if you took them young enough. But till they are, I'd rather not be. It's horrid to be different; and I'm keeping it to myself—in the office anyhow—and living my past down the best I can."

As though her words had suggested it, Worth spoke again, "Where did you meet Cummings? Seems you find time to go out with him."

"I've known Mr. Cummings for years," Barbara spoke quietly, but she looked self-conscious. "I knew he was with those friends of mine at the Orpheum last night, but I didn't expect him to call for me at Tait's—or rather I thought they'd all come in after me. There wasn't anything special about it—no special appointment with him, I mean."

I had forgotten them for a minute or two, closing my desk, finding my coat, when I heard some one come into the outer office, a visitor, for little Pete's voice went up to a shrill yap with the information that I was busy. Then the knob turned, the door opened, and there stood Cummings. At first he saw only me at the desk.

"Your friend calling for you again, Bobs—by appointment?" Worth's question drew the lawyer's glance, and he stared at them apparently a good deal taken aback, while Worth added, "Seems to keep pretty close tab on your movements." The low tone might have been considered joking, but there was war in the boy's eye.

It was as though Cummings answered the challenge, rather than opened with what he had intended.

"My business is with you, Gilbert." He came in and shut the door behind him, leaving his hand on the knob. "And I've been some time finding you." He stopped there, and was so long about getting anything else out that Worth finally suggested,

"The money?" And when there was no reply but a surprised look, "How do you stand now?"

"Still seventy-two thousand to raise." Cummings spoke vaguely. This was not what had brought him to the office. He finished with the abrupt question, "Were you at Santa Ysobel last night?"

"Hold on, Cummings," I broke in. "What you got? Let us—"

I was shut off there by Worth's,

"It's Sunday afternoon. I want that money tomorrow morning. You've not come through? You've not dug up what I sent you after?"

I could see that the lawyer was absolutely nonplussed. Again he gave Worth one of those queer, probing looks before he said doggedly,

"The question of that money can wait."

"It can't wait." Worth's eyes began to light up. "What you talking, Cummings—an extension?" And when the lawyer made no answer to this, "I'll not crawl in with a broken leg asking favors of that bank crowd. Are you quitting on me? If so, say it—and I'll find a way to raise the sum, myself."

"I've raised all but seventy-two thousand of the necessary amount," said Cummings slowly. "What I want to know is—how much have you raised?"

"See here, Cummings," again I mixed in. "I was present when that arrangement was made. Nothing was said about Worth raising any money."

Cummings barely glanced around at me as he said, "I made a suggestion to him; in your presence, as you say, Boyne. I want to know if he carried it out." Then, giving his full attention to Worth, "Did you see your father last night?"

On instinct I blurted,

"For heaven's sake, keep your mouth shut, Worth!"

For a detective that certainly was an incautious speech. Cummings' eye flared suspicion at me, and his voice was a menace.

"You keep out of this, Boyne."

"You tell what's up your sleeve, Cummings," I countered. "This is no witness-stand cross-examination. What you got?"

But Worth answered for him, hotly,

"If Cummings hasn't seventy-two thousand dollars I commissioned him to raise for me, I don't care what he's got."

"And you didn't go to your father for it last night?" Cummings returned to his question. He had moved close to the boy. Barbara stood just where she was when the door opened. Neither paid any attention to her. But she looked at the two men, drawn up with glances clinched, and spoke out suddenly in her clear young voice, as though there was no row on hand,

"Worth was with me last night, you know, Mr. Cummings."

"I seem to have noticed something of the sort," Cummings said with labored sarcasm. "And he'd been with that wedding party earlier in the evening, I suppose."

"With me till Miss Wallace came in." Worth's natural disposition to disoblige the lawyer could be depended on to keep from Cummings whatever information he wanted before giving us his own news. "What you got, Cummings?" I prompted again, impatiently. "Come through."

His eyes never shifted an instant from Worth Gilbert's face.

"A telegram—from Santa Ysobel," he said slowly.

Worth shrugged and half turned away.

"I'm not interested in your telegram, Cummings."

Instantly I saw what the boy thought: that the other had taken it on himself to apply for the money to Thomas Gilbert, and had been turned down.

"Not interested?" Cummings repeated in that dry, lawyer voice that speaks from the teeth out; on the mere tone, I braced for something nasty. "I think you are. My telegram's from the coroner."

Silence after that; Worth obstinately mute; Barbara and I afraid to ask. There was a little tremor of Cummings' nostril, he couldn't keep the flicker out of his eye, as he said, staring straight at Worth,

"It states that your father shot himself last night. The body wasn't discovered till late this morning, in his study."

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CHAPTER IX

SANTA YSOBEL

OF all unexpected things. I went down to Santa Ysobel with Worth Gilbert. It happened this way: Cummings, one of those individuals on whose tombstone may truthfully be put, "Born a man—and died a lawyer," seemed rather taken aback at the effect of the blow he'd launched. If he was after information, I can't think he learned much in the moment while Worth stood regarding him with an unreadable eye.

There was only a little grimmer tightening of the jaw muscle, something bleak and robbed in the glance of the eye; the face of one, it seemed to me, who grieved the more because he was denied real sorrow for his loss, and Worth had tramped to the window and stood with his back to us, putting the thing over in his silent, fighting fashion, speaking to none of us. It was when Barbara followed, took hold of his sleeve and began half whispering up into his face that Cummings jerked his hat from the table where he had thrown it, and snapped,

"Boyne—can I have a few minutes of your time?"

"Jerry," Worth's voice halted me at the door, "Leave that card—an order—for me. For the suit-case."

Cummings was ahead of me, and he turned back to listen, but I crowded him along and was pretty hot when I faced him in the outer office to demand,

"What kind of a deal do you call this—ripping in here to throw this thing at the boy in such a way? What is your idea? What you trying to put over?"

"Go easy, Boyne." Cummings chewed his words a little before he let them out. "There's something queer in this business. I intend to know what it is."

"Queer," I repeated his word. "If the lawyers and the detectives get to running down all the queer things—that don't concern them a little bit—the world won't have any more peace."

"All right, if you say it doesn't concern you," Cummings threw me overboard with relief I thought. "It does concern me. When I couldn't get—him"—a jerk of the head indicated that the pronoun stood for Worth—"at the Palace, found he'd been out all day and left no word at the desk when he expected to be in, I took my telegram to Knapp, and then to Whipple. They were flabbergasted."

"The bank crowd," I said. "Now why did you run to them? On account of Worth's engagement with them to-morrow morning? Wasn't that exceeding your orders? You saw that he intends to meet it, in spite of this."

"Why not because of this?" Cummings demanded sharply. "He's in better shape to meet it now his father's dead. He's the only heir. That's the first thing Knapp and Whipple spoke of—and I saw them separately."

"Can that stuff. What do you think you're hinting at?"

"Something queer," he repeated his phrase. "Wake up, Boyne. Knapp and Whipple both saw Thomas Gilbert a little before noon yesterday. He was in the bank for the final transfer of the Hanford interests. They'd as soon have thought of my committing suicide that night—or you doing it. They swear there was nothing in his manner or bearing to suggest such a state of mind, and everything in the business he was engaged on to suggest that he expected to live out his days like any man."

I thought very little of this; it is common in cases of suicide for family, friends or business associates to talk in exactly this way, to believe it, and yet for the deep-seated moving cause to be easily discovered by an unprejudiced outsider. I said as much to Cummings. And while I spoke, we could hear a murmur of young voices from the inner room.

"Damn it all," the lawyer's irritation spurted out suddenly, "With a cub like that for a son, I'd say the reason wasn't far to seek. Better keep your eye peeled round that young man, Boyne."

"I will," I agreed, and he took his departure. I turned back into the private room.

"Worth"—I put it quietly—"what say I go to Santa Ysobel with you? You could bring me back Monday morning."

He agreed at once, silently, but thankfully I thought.

Barbara, listening, proposed half timidly to go with us, staying the night at the Thornhill place, being brought back before work time Monday, and was accepted simply. So it came that when we had a blowout as the crown of a dozen other petty disasters which had delayed our progress toward Santa Ysobel, and found our spare tire flat, Barbara jumped down beside Worth where he stood dragging out the pump, and stopped him, suggesting that we save time by running the last few miles on the rim and getting fixed up at Capehart's garage. He climbed in without a word, and drove on toward where Santa Ysobel lies at the head of its broad valley, surrounded by the apricot, peach and prune orchards that are its wealth.

We came into the fringes of the town in the obscurity of approaching night; a thick tulle fog had blown down on the north wind. The little foot-hill city was all drowned in it; tree-tops, roofs, the gable ends of houses, the illuminated dial of the town clock on the city hall, sticking up from the blur like things seen in a dream. As we headed for a garage with the name Capehart on it, we heard, soft, muffled, seven strokes from the tower.

"Getting in late," Worth said absently. "Bill still keeps the old place?"

"Yes. Just the same," Barbara said. "He married our Sarah, you know—was that before you went away? Of course not," and added for my enlightenment, "Sarah Gibbs was father's housekeeper for years. She brought me up."

We drove into the big, dimly lighted building; there came to us from its corner office what might have been described as a wide man, not especially imposing in breadth, but with a sort of loose-jointed effectiveness to his movements, and a pair of roving, yellowish-hazel eyes in his broad, good-humored face, mighty observing I'd say, in spite of the lazy roll of his glance.

"Been stepping on tacks, Mister?" he hailed, having looked at the tires before he took stock of the human freight.

"Hello, Bill," Worth was singing out. "Give me another machine—or get our spare filled and on—whichever's quickest. I want to make it to the house as soon as I can."

"Lord, boy!" The wide man began wiping a big paw before offering it. "I'm glad to see you."

They shook hands. Worth repeated his request, but the garage man was already unbuckling the spare, going to the work with a brisk efficiency that contradicted his appearance.

Barbara sitting quietly beside me, we heard them talking at the back of the machine, as the jack quickly lifted us and Worth went to it with Capehart to unbolt the rim; a low-toned steady stream from the wide man, punctuated now and then by a word from Worth.

"Yeh," Capehart grunted, prying off the tire. "Heard it m'self 'bout noon—or a little after. Yeh, Ward's Undertaking Parlors."

"Undertaking parlors!" Worth echoed. Capehart, hammering on the spare, agreed.

"Nobody in town that knowed what to do about it; so the coroner took a-holt, I guess, and kinda fixed it to suit hisself. Did you phone ahead to see how things was out to the house?"

"Tried to," Worth said. "The operator couldn't raise it."

"Course not." Capehart was coupling on the air. "Your chink's off every Sunday—has the whole day—and the Devil only could guess where a Chinaman'd go when he ain't working. Eddie Hughes ought to be on the job out there—but would he?"

"Father still kept Eddie?"

"Yeh." The click of the jack and the car was lowering. "Eddie's lasted longer than I looked to see him. Due to be fired any time this past year. Been chasing over 'crost the tracks. Got him a girl there, one of these cannery girls. Well, she's sort of married, I guess, but that don't stop Eddie. 'F I see him, I'll tell him you want him."

They came to the front of the machine; Worth thrust his hand in his pocket. Capehart checked him with,

"Let it go on the bill." Then, as Worth swung into his seat, Barbara bent forward from behind my shoulder, the careless yellowish eyes that saw everything got a fair view of her, and with a sort of subdued crow, "Look who's here!" Capehart took hold of the upright to lean his square form in and say earnestly, "While you're in Santa Ysobel, don't forget that we got a spare room at our house."

"Next time," Barbara raised her voice to top the hum of the engine. "I'm only here for over night, now, and I'm going down to Mrs. Thornhill's."

We were out in the street once more, leaving the cannery district on our right, tucked away to itself across the railroad tracks, running on Main Street to City Hall Square, where we struck into Broad, followed it out past the churches and to that length of it that held the fine homes in their beautiful grounds, getting close at last to where town melts again into orchards. The road between its rows of fernlike pepper trees was a wet gleam before us, all black and silver; the arc lights made big misty blurs without much illumination as we came to the Thornhill place. Worth got down and, though she told him he needn't bother, took her in to the gate. For a minute I waited, getting the bulk of the big frame house back among the trees, with a single light twinkling from an upper story window; then Worth flung into the car and we speeded on, skirting a long frontage of lawns, beautifully kept, pearly with the fog, set off with artfully grouped shrubbery and winding walks. There was no barrier but a low stone coping; the drive to the Gilbert place went in on the side farthest from the Thornhill's. We ran in under a carriage porch. The house was black.

"See if I can raise anybody," said Worth as he jumped to the ground. "Let you in, and then I'll run the roadster around to the garage."

But the house was so tightly locked up that he had finally to break in through a pantry window. I was out in front when he made it, and saw the lights begin to flash up, the porch lamp flooding me with a sudden glare before he threw the door open.

"Cold as a vault in here."

He twisted his broad shoulders in a shudder, and I looked about me. It was a big entrance hall, with a wide stairway. There on the hat tree hung a man's light overcoat, a gray fedora hat; a stick leaned below. When the master of the house went out of it this time, he hadn't needed these. Abruptly Worth turned and led the way into what I knew was the living room, with a big open fireplace in it.

"Make yourself as comfortable as you can, Jerry. I'll get a blaze here in two shakes. I suppose you're hungry as a wolf—I am. This is a hell of a place I've brought you into."

"Forget it," I returned. "I can look after myself. I'm used to rustling. Let me make that fire."

"All right." He gave up his place on the hearth to me, straightened himself and stood a minute, saying, "I'll raid the kitchen. Chung's sure to have plenty of food cooked. He may not be back here before midnight."

"Midnight?" I echoed. "Is that usual?"

"Used to be. Chung's been with father a long time. Good chink. Always given his whole Sunday, and if he was on hand to get Monday's breakfast—no questions."

"Left last night, you think?"

Worth shot me a glance of understanding.

"Sometimes he would—after cleaning up from dinner. But he wouldn't have heard the shot, if that's what you're driving at."

He left me, going out through the hall. My fire burned. I thawed out the kinks the long, chill ride had put in me. Then Worth hailed; I went out and found him with a coffee-pot boiling on the gas range, a loaf and a cold roast set out. He had sand, that boy; in this wretched home-coming, his manner was neither stricken nor defiant. He seemed only a little graver than usual as he waited on me, hunting up stuff in places he knew of to put some variety into our supper.

Where I sat I faced a back window, and my eye was caught by the appearance of a strange light, quite a little distance from the house, apparently in another building, but showing as a vague glow on the fog.

"What's down there?" I asked. Worth answered without taking the trouble to lean forward and look,

"The garage—and the study."

"Huh? The study's separate from the house?"

I had been thinking of the suicide as a thing of this dwelling, an affair in some room within its walls. Of course Chung would not hear the shot. "Who's down there?"

"Eddie Hughes has a room off the garage."

"He's in it now."

"How do you know?" he asked quickly.

"There's a light—or there was. It's gone now."

"That wouldn't have been Eddie," Worth said. "His room's on the other side, toward the back street. What you saw was the light from these windows shining on the fog. Makes queer effects sometimes."

I knew that wasn't it, but I didn't argue with him, only remarked,

"I'd like to have a look at that place, Worth, if you don't mind."

CHAPTER X

A SHADOW IN THE FOG

AGAIN I saw that glow from the Gilbert garage, hanging on the fog; a luminosity of the fog; saw it disappear as the mist deepened and shrouded it. But Worth was answering me, and somehow his words seemed forced;

"Sit tight a minute, Jerry. Have another cup of coffee while I telephone, then I'll put the roadster in and open up down there. I'll call you—or you can see my lights."

He left me. I heard him at the instrument in the hall get his number, talk to some one in a low voice, and then go out the front door; next thing was the sound of the motor, the glare of its lamps as it rounded into the driveway and started down back, illuminating everything. In the general glare thrown on the fog, the fainter light was invisible, but across a plot of kitchen garden I saw where it had been; a square, squat building of concrete, flat roofed, vining plants in boxes drooping over its cornice; the typical garage of such an establishment, but nearly double the usual size. The light had come from there, but how? In the short time that the lamps of the machine were showing it up to me, there seemed no windows on this side; only the double doors for the car's entrance—closed now—and a single door which was crossed by two heavy, barricading planks nailed in the form of a great X.

Worth ran the machine close up against the doors, jumped down, and I could see his tall form, blurred by the mist, moving about to slide them open. The lamps of the roadster made little showing now as he rolled it in. Then these were switched off and everything down there was dark as a pocket. For a time I sat and waited for him to light up and call me, then started down. The fog was making that kind of dimness which has a curious, illusory character. I suppose I had gone half the distance of the garden walk, when, thrown up startlingly on the obscurity, I saw a square of white, and across that shining screen, moved the silhouette of a human head. The whole thing danced before my eyes for a bare second, then blackness.

With Cummings' queer hints in my mind, I started running across the garden toward it. About the first thing I did was to step into a cold frame, plunging my foot through the glass, all but going to my knees in it; and when I got up, swearing, I was turned around, ran into bushes, tripped over obstructions, and traveled, I think, in a circle.

Then I began to go more cautiously. No use getting excited. That was only Worth I had seen. And still I was unwilling to call, ask him to show a light. I groped along until my outstretched fingers came across the corner of a building, rough, stonelike—the concrete garage and study. I felt along, seeing a bit now, and was soon passing my hands over the barricading planks of that door.

I might have lit a match, but I preferred to find out what I could by feeling around, and that cautiously. I discovered that the door had been broken in, the top panels shattered to kindling wood, the force of the assault having burst a hinge, so that the whole thing sagged drunkenly behind the heavy planks that propped it, while a strong bolt, quite useless, was still clamped into a socket which had been torn, screws and all, from the inside casing.

Sliding my hands over the broken top panel I found that it had been covered on its inner side by a piece of canvas; the screen on which that shadow had been thrown—from within the room. There was no light there now; there was no sound of motion within. The drip of the fog from the eaves was the only break in the stillness.

"Worth?" I shouted, at last, and he answered me instantly, hallooing from behind me, and to one side of the house. I could hear him running and when he spoke it was close to my shoulder.

"Where are you, Jerry?"

"Where are you," I countered. "Or rather, where have you been?"

"Getting a bar to pry off these boards."

"A bar?" I echoed stupidly.

"A crowbar from the shed. These planks will have to come off to let us in."

"The devil you say!" I was exasperated. "There's some one in here now—or was a minute back. Show me the other way in."

I heard the ring of the steel bar as its end hit the hard graveled path.

"Some one in there? Jerry, you're seeing things."

"Sure I am," I agreed drily. "But you get me to that other door quick!"

"The only other door is locked. I tried it from the garage. You're dreaming."

For reply, I ran up to the door and thrust my fist through the canvas, ripping it away from its clumsy tacking.

"Who's in there?" I cried. "Answer me!"

Dead silence; then a click as Worth snapped on a flood of light from his pocket torch, saying tolerantly, tiredly,

"I told you there was no one. There couldn't be."

"I tell you, Worth, there was. I saw the shadow on the square of that canvas. Give me the torch."

I pushed the flashlight through the opening and played the light cone about the room in a quick survey; then brought the circle of white glow to rest upon one of the side walls; and my hand went down and back to grip fingers about the butt of my revolver. There was, as Worth had said, but one other door to this room; but more, there was apparently no other exit; no windows, no breaks in the walls. My circle of light was on this second door; and the very heart of that circle was a heavy steel bolt on the door, the bar of which was firmly shot into the socket on the frame. The only exit from that room, other than the door through which I now leaned with pistol raised, was locked—bolted from the inside!

Worth was crowding his big frame into the opening beside me.

"Keep back," I growled. "Some one's inside," and I sent the light shaft into corners to drive out the shadows, to cut in under the desk and chairs. Worth's reply was a laugh, and his arm went by me to reach inside the door. Then, as his fingers found the button, a light sprang out from a lamp upon the center desk.

"You're letting your nerves play the deuce with you, Jerry," he said lightly. "Make way for my crowbar and we'll get in out of the wet."

I made no answer, but for a long moment more I searched that room with my eyes; but it was the kind you see all over at a glance. Big, square, plain, it hadn't a window in it; the walls, lined with book shelves, floor to ceiling; a fireplace; a library table with drawers; a few chairs. No chance for a hide-out. I glanced at the ceiling and confirmed the evidence of my eyes. There was a skylight, and through it had come that curious glow that first attracted my attention to the place.

Then I gave Worth room to wield his tools on the barred door, while I ran quickly back to the house, into the kitchen, and plumped down in the chair where I had sat before. The light showed on the fog, brightened and dimmed as the mist drifted past. There was no possibility of a mistake: some one had been in the study, had turned on the table lamp, had projected his shadow against the patched panel of the door, and had somehow left the room, one door bolted, the only other exit barred and nailed.

I went back and rejoined Worth who was standing where a brownish stain on the rug marked a spot a little nearer the corner of the table than it was to the outer door. A curious place for a suicide to fall. Behind the table was the library chair in which Thomas Gilbert worked when at his desk; beside it a small cabinet with a humidor on its top and the open door below revealing several decanters and bottles, whisky and wine glasses, a tray; between the desk and the fireplace were two other chairs, large and comfortable; but in front of the table—between it and the door—was barren floor.

It is a fact that most men who shoot themselves do so while sitting; some lying in a bed; few standing. The psychology of this I must leave to others, but experience has taught me to question the suicide of one who has seemingly placed the muzzle of a revolver against him while on his feet. Thomas Gilbert had stood; had chosen to take his life as he was walking from door to desk, or from desk to door.

"Worth," I said. "There was somebody in here just now."

"Couldn't have been, Jerry," he answered absently; then added, his eyes on that stain, "I never could calculate what my father would do. But when I talked to him last night, right here in this room, he didn't seem to me a man ready to take his own life."

"You quarreled?"

"We always quarreled, whenever we met."

"But this quarrel was more bitter than usual?"

"The last quarrel would seem the bitterest, wouldn't it, Jerry?" he asked. Then, after a moment, "Poor Jim Edwards!"

I caught my tongue to hold back the question. Worth went on,

"When I phoned him just now, he hadn't heard a word about it. Seemed terribly upset."

"Hadn't heard?" I echoed. "How was that?"

"You know we saw him at Tait's last night. He took the Pacheco Pass road from San Francisco;

drove straight to his ranch without hitting Santa Ysobel."

I wanted another look at that man Edwards. I was to have it. Worth went on absently,

"He'll be along presently to stay here while I'm away Monday. Told me it would be the first time he'd put foot in the house for four years. As boys up in Sonoma county, he and father always disagreed, but sometime these last years there was a big split over something. They were barely on speaking terms—and good old Jim took my news harder than as though I'd been telling him the death of a near friend."

"Works like that with us humans," I nodded. "Let some one die that you've disagreed with, and you remember every row you ever had with them; remember it and regret it—which is foolish."

"Which is foolish," Worth repeated, and seemed for the first time able to get away from the spot at which he had stopped.

He went over to the empty, fireless hearth and stood there, his back to the room, elbows on the mantel propping his head, face bent, oblivious to anything that I might do. It oughtn't to be hard to find the way this place could be entered and left by a man solid enough to cast a shadow, with quick fingers to snap the light on and off. But when I made a painstaking examination of a corner grate with a flue too small for anything but a chimney swallow to go up and down, a ceiling solidly beamed and paneled, the glass that formed the skylight set in firmly as part of the roof, when I'd turned up rugs and inspected an unbroken floor, even tried the corners of book cases to see if they masked a false entrance, I owned myself, for the moment, beaten there.

"Give me your torch—or go with me, Worth," I said. "I'd like to take a scoot around outside."

He didn't speak, only indicated the flashlight by a motion, where it lay on the shelf beside his hand. I took it, unbolted the door, and stepped into the garage.

Everything all right here. My roadster; a much handsomer small machine beyond it; a bench, portable forge and drill made a repair shop of one corner, and as my light flashed over these, I checked and stared. Why had Worth gone to the shed hunting a crowbar to open the door? Here were tools that would have served as well. I put from me the hateful thought, and damned Cummings and his suspicions. The shadow didn't have to be Worth. Certainly he had not first lit that lamp, for I had seen it from the kitchen with him beside me. Some one other than Worth had been in there when Worth put up the roadster. I'd find the man it really was. But even as I crossed to Eddie Hughes's door, something at the back of my head was saying to me that Worth could have been in that room—that there was time for it to be, if he had taken the crowbar from the garage and not from the shed as he said he did.

At this I took myself in hand. The lie would have been so clumsy a one that there was no way but to accept this statement for the truth; and some one else had made that shadow on the canvas.

I tried the chauffeur's door and found it locked; called, shook it, and had set my shoulder against it to burst it in, when the rolling door on the street side moved a little, and a voice said.

"H-y-ah! What you doin' there?"

I turned and flashed my light on the six-inch crack of the sliding door. It gave me a strip of man, a long drab face at top, solid, meaty looking, yet somehow slightly cadaverous, a half shut eye, a crooked mouth—if I'd met that mug in San Francisco, I'd have labeled it "tough," and located it South of Market Street.

Slowly, it seemed rather reluctantly, Eddie Hughes worked the six-inch crack wider by working himself through it.

"What the hell do you want in my room for?" he demanded. The form of the words was truculent, but the words themselves slid in a sort of spiritless fashion from the corner of that crooked mouth of his, and he added in the next breath, "I'll open up for you, when I've lit the blinks."

There was a central lamp that made the whole place as bright as day. Eddie fumbled a key out of his pocket, threw the door of his room open, and stepped back to let me pass him.

"Capehart tells me Worth's here," he said as we went in.

"When?" I gave him a sharp look. He seemed not to notice it.

"Just now. I came straight from there."

He came straight from there? Did he supply an alibi so neatly because of that shadowy head on the door panel? For a long minute we each took measure of the other, but Eddie's nerves were less reliable than mine; he spoke first.

"Well?" he grunted, scarcely above his breath. And when I continued to stare silently at him, he writhed a shoulder with, "What's doing? What d'yuh want of me?"

Still silently, I pulled out with my thumb through the armhole of my vest the police badge pinned to the suspender. His ill-colored face went a shade nearer the yellow white of tallow.

"What for?" he asked huskily. "You haven't got nothin' on me. It was suicide—cor'ner's jury says so. Lord! It has to be, him layin' there, all hunched up on the floor, his gun so tight in his mitt that they had to pry the fingers off it!"

"So you found the body?"

He nodded and gulped.

"I told all I knowed at the inquest," he said doggedly.

"Tell it again," I commanded.

Standing there, working his hands together as though he held some small, accustomed tool that he was turning, shifting from foot to foot, with long breaks in his speech, the chauffeur finally put me into possession of what he knew—or what he wished me to know. He had been out all night. That was usual with him Saturdays. Where? Over around the canneries. Had friends that lived there. He got into this place about dawn, and went straight to bed.

"Hold on, Hughes," I stopped him there. "You never went to bed—that night, or any other night—until you'd had a jolt from the bottle inside."

He gave me a surly, half frightened glance, then said quickly,

"Not a chance. Bolts on the doors, locks everywhere; all tight as a jail. Take it from me, he wasn't the kind you want to have a run-in with—any time.

Always just as cool as ice himself; try to make you believe he could tell what you were up to, clear across town. Hold it over you as if he was God almighty that stuck folks together and set 'em walkin' around and thinkin' things."

He broke off and looked over his shoulder in the direction of the study. The walls were thick—concrete; the door heavy. No sound of Worth's moving in there could be heard in this room. Apparently it was the old terror of his employer, or the new terror of the employer's death, that spoke when he said,

"I got up this morning late with a throat like the back of a chimney. Lord! I never wanted a drink so bad in my life—had to have one. The chink leaves my breakfast for me Sundays; but I knew I couldn't eat till I'd had one. So I—so I—"

It was as though some recollection fairly choked off his voice. I finished for him.

"So you went in there—" I pointed at the study door, "and found the body."

"Naw! How the hell could I? I told you—locked. I crawled up on the roof, though; huntin' a way in, and I looked through the skylight. There he was. On the floor. His eyes weren't open much, but they was watchin' me—sort of sneerin'. I come down off that roof like a bat outa hell, and scuttled over to Vandeman's where his chink was on the porch, I bellerin' at him. I telephoned from there. For the bulls; and the cor'ner; and everybody. Gawd! I was all in."

I caught one point in the tale.

"So the way into the study is through the skylight, Hughes?" and he shook his head vaguely, fumbling his lips with a trembling hand as he replied, "Honest to God, Cap'n, I don't know. I never tried. I gave just one look through it, and—" He broke off with a shudder.

"Get a ladder," I commanded. "I want to see that skylight."

While he was gone on his errand to the shed, I investigated the outer walls of the study with the torch, hunting some break in their solidity. They were concrete; a hair-crack would have been visible in the electric glow; there was no break. Then, as he placed the ladder against the coping, I climbed to the roof and stepped across its firmness to the skylight. I looked down.

Worth, kneeling on the hearth, was laying a fire in the corner grate. As he did not glance up, I knew he had not heard me. Evidently the study had been built to resist the disturbance of sound from without. That meant that the report of the revolver inside had not been heard by any one outside the walls.

Directly below me was the library table and upon its top a blue desk blotter; a silver filagreed inkstand stood open; penholders, pencils, paper knife were on a tray beside it, one pen lying separate from the others with a ruler, upon the blotting pad; books and a magazine neatly in a pile. The walls, as I circled them with my eyes, were book-lined everywhere except for the grate and the two doors.

Then I inspected the skylight, frame and glass, feeling it over with my hands. There was no entrance here. Even should a pane of glass be removable—all seemingly solid and tight—the frame between and the sash were of steel, and the panes were too small for the passage of a man. I crept back to the ladder as Worth was striking a match to light the pitch-pine kindling.

"What about this Vandeman chink?" I asked of Hughes as I rejoined him at the foot of the ladder. "Does he hang around here much?"

"Him and Chung visit back and forth a bit. I hear 'em talkin' hy-lee hy-lo sometimes when I go by the kitchen."

"Take me over there," I said.

The fog was beginning to blow away in threads; moonlight somewhere back of it made a queer, gray, glimmering world around us. We circled the garden by the path, passing a sort of gardener's tool shed where Hughes left the ladder, and from which I judged Worth had brought the bar he pried the door planks off with, to find a gap in a hedge between this place and the next.

There was a light in the rear of the house over there, and a well-trodden path leading from the hedge gap made what I took to be a servants' highway.

Vandeman's house proved to be, as nearly as one could see it in the darkness, a sprawling bungalow, with courts, pergolas and terraces bursting out on all sides of it. I could fairly see it of a fine afternoon, with its showy master sitting on one of the showy porches, serving afternoon tea in his best manner to the best people of Santa Ysobel. Just the husband for that doll-faced girl, if she only thought so. What could she have done with a young outlaw like Worth?

When I looked at the Chinaman in charge there, I gave up my idea of questioning him. Civilly enough, with a precise and educated usage of the English language, he confirmed what Eddie Hughes had already told me about the telephoning from that place this morning; and I went no further. I know the Chinese—if anybody not Mongolian can say they know the race—and I have also a suitable respect for the value of time. A week of steady questioning of Vandeman's yellow man would have brought me nowhere. He was that kind of a chink; grave, respectful, placid and impervious.

On the way back I asked Eddie about the Thornhill servants at the house on the other side of Gilbert's, and found they kept but one, "a sort of old lady," Eddie called her, and I guessed easily at the decayed gentlewoman kind of person. It seemed that Mrs. Thornhill was a widow, and there wasn't much money now to keep up the handsome place.

I left Eddie slipping eel-like through the big doors, and went into the study to find Worth sitting before the blazing hearth. He looked up as I entered to remark quietly,

"Bobs said she'd be over later, and I told her to come on down here."

CHAPTER XI

THE MISSING DIARY

MY experience as a detective has convinced me that the evident is usually true; that in a great majority of cases crime leaves a straight trail, and ambiguities are more often due to the inability of the trailer than to the cunning of the trailed. Such reputation as I have established is due to acceptance of and earnest adherence to the obvious.

In this affair of Thomas Gilbert's death, everything so far pointed one way. The body had been found in a bolted room, revolver in hand; on the wall over the mantel hung the empty holster; Worth assured me the gun was kept always loaded; and there might be motive enough for suicide in the quarrel last night between father and son.

Because of that flitting shadow I had seen, I knew this place was not impervious. Some one person, at least, could enter and leave the room easily, quickly, while its doors were locked. But that might be Hughes—or even Worth—with some reason for doing so not willingly explained, and some means not readily seen. It probably had nothing to do with Thomas Gilbert's sudden death, could not offset in my mind the conviction of Thomas Gilbert's stiffened fingers about the pistol's butt. That I made a second thorough investigation of the study interior was not because I questioned the manner of the death.

I began taking down books from the shelves at regular intervals, sounding the thick dead-wall, in search of a secreted entrance. I came on a row of volumes whose red morocco backs carried nothing but dates.

"Account books?" I asked.

Worth turned his head to look, and the bleakest thing that could be called a smile twisted his lips a little, as he said,

"My father's diaries."

"Quite a lot of them."

"Yes. He'd kept diaries for thirty years."

"But he seems to have dropped the habit. There is no 1920 book."

"Oh, yes there is," very definitely. "He never gave up setting down the sins of his family and neighbors while his eyes had sight to see them, and his hand the cunning to write." He spoke with extraordinary bitterness, finishing, "He would have had it on the desk there. The current book was always kept convenient to his hand."

An idea occurred to me.

"Worth," I asked, "did you see that 1920 volume when you were here last night?"

He looked a little startled, and I prompted,

"Were you too excited to have noticed a detail like that?"

"I wasn't excited; not in the sense of being confused," he spoke slowly. "The book was there; he'd been writing in it. I remember looking at it and thinking that as soon as I was gone, he'd sit down in his chair and put every damn' word of our row into it. That was his way. The seamy side of Santa Ysobel life's recorded in those books. I always understood they amounted to a pack of neighborhood dynamite."

"Got to find that last book," I said.

He nodded listlessly. I went to it, giving that room such a searching as would have turned out a bent pin, had one been mislaid in it. I even took down from the shelves books of similar size to see if the lost volume had been slipped into a camouflaging cover—all to no good. It wasn't there. And when I had finished I was positive of two things; the study had no other entrance than the apparent ones, and the diary of 1920 had been removed from the room since Worth saw it there the night before. I reached for one of the other volumes. Worth spoke again in a sort of dragging voice,

"What do you want to look at them for, Jerry?"

"It's not idle curiosity," I told him, a bit pricked.

"I know it's not that." The old, affectionate tone went right to my heart. "But if you're thinking you'll find in them any explanation of my father's taking his own life, I'm here to tell you you're mistaken. Plenty there, no doubt, to have driven a tender hearted man off the earth. . . . He was different." Eyeing the book in my hand, the boy blurted with sudden heat, "Those damn' diaries have been wife and child and meat and drink to him. They were his reason for living—not dying!"

"Start me right in regard to your father, Worth," I urged anxiously. "It's important."

The boy gave me his shoulder and continued to stare down into the fire, as he said at last, slowly,

"I would rather leave him alone, Jerry."

I knew it would be useless to insist. Never then or thereafter did I hear him say more of his father's character. At that, he could hardly have told more in an hour's talk.

At random, I took the volume that covered the year in which, as I remembered, Thomas Gilbert's wife had secured her divorce from him. Neatly and carefully written in a script as readable as type, the books, if I am a judge, had literary style. They were much more than mere diaries. True, each entry began with a note of the day's weather, and certain small records of the writer's personal affairs; but these went oddly enough with what followed; a biting analysis of the inner life. the estimated intentions and emotions, of the beings nearest to him. It was inhuman stuff. But Worth was right; there was no soil for suicide in this matter written by a hand guided by a harsh, censorious mind; too much egotism here to willingly give over the rôle of conscience for his friends. Friends?—could a man have friends who regarded humanity through such unkindly, wide open, all-seeing eyes?

Worth, seated across from me on the other side of the fire, stared straight into the leaping blaze; but I doubted if that was what he saw. On his face was the look which I had come to know, of the dignified householder who had gone in and shut the door on whatever of dismay and confusion might be in his private affairs. I began to read his father's version of the separation from his mother, with its ironic references to her most intimate friend.

"Marion would like to see Laura Bowman ship Tony and marry Jim Edwards. I swear the modern woman has played bridge so long that her idea of the most serious obligation in life—the marriage vow—is, 'Never mind. If you don't like the hand you have got, shuffle, cut, and deal again!' "

I dropped the book to my knee and looked over at Worth, asking,

"This Mrs. Dr. Bowman that we met last night at Tait's—she was a special friend of your mother's?"

"They were like sisters—in more than one way." I knew without his telling it that he alluded to their common misfortune of being both unhappily married. His mother, a woman of more force than the other, had gained her freedom.

"Femina Priores." I came on an entry standing oddly alone. "Marion is to secure the divorce—at my suggestion. I have demanded that our son share his time between us."

Again I let the book down on my knee and looked across at the silent fellow there. And I had heard him compassionate Barbara Wallace for having painful memories of her childhood! I believe he was at that moment more at peace with his father than he had ever been in his life—and that he grieved that this was so. I knew, too, that the forgiveness and forgetting would not extend to these pitiless records. Without disturbing him, I laid the book I held down and scouted forward for things more recent.

"Laura Bowman"—through one entry after another Gilbert kicked that poor woman's name like a football. Very fine and righteous and high-minded in what he said, but writing it out in full and calling her painful difficulties—the writhing of a sensitive, high-strung woman, mismated with a tyrant—an example notably stupid and unoriginal, of the eternal matrimonial triangle. Bowman evidently kept his sympathy, so far as such a nature can be said to entertain that gentle emotion.

I ran through other volumes, merciless recitals, now and again, of the shortcomings of his associates or servants; a cold blooded misrepresentation of his son; a sneer for the affair with Ina Thornhill, with the dictum, sound enough no doubt, that the girl herself did the courting, and that she had no conscience—"The extreme society type of parasite," he put it. And then the account of his break with Edwards.

Dr. Bowman, it seems, had come to Gilbert in confidence for help, saying that his wife had left his house in the small hours the previous night, nothing but an evening wrap pulled over her night wear, and that he guessed where she could be found, since she hadn't gone to her mother's. He asked Gilbert to be his ambassador with messages of pardon. Didn't want to go himself, because that would mean a row, and he was determined, if possible, to keep the thing private, giving a generous reason: that he wasn't willing to disgrace the woman. All of which, after he'd written it down, the diarist discredited with his brief comment to the effect that Tony Bowman shunned publicity because scandal of the sort would hurt his practice, and his pride as well, and that he didn't go out to Jim Edwards's ranch because, under these circumstances, he would be afraid of Jim.

Thomas Gilbert did the doctor's errand for him. The entry concerning it occupied the next day. I read between the lines how much he enjoyed his position of god from the machine, swooping down on the two he found out there, estimating their situation and behavior in his usual hair-splitting fashion, sitting as a court of last appeal. It was of no use for Edwards to explain to him that Laura Bowman was practically crazy when she walked out of her husband's house as the culmination of a miserable scene—the sort that had been more and more frequent there of late—carrying black-and-blue marks where he had grabbed and shaken her. The statement that it was by mere chance she encountered Jim seemed to have made Gilbert smile, and Jim's taking of her out to the ranch, the assertion that it was the only thing to do, that she was sick and delirious, had inspired Gilbert to say to him, quite neatly, "You weren't delirious, I take it—not more than usual."

Then he demanded that Laura go with him, at once, back to her husband, or out to her mother's. She considered the matter and chose to go back to Bowman, saying bitterly that her mother made the match in the first place, and stood always against her daughter and with her son-in-law whatever he did. Plainly it took all of Laura's persuasions to prevent actual blows between Gilbert and Edwards. Also, she would only promise to go back and live under Bowman's roof, but not as his wife—and the whole situation was much aggravated.

I followed Mr. Thomas Gilbert's observation of this affair: his amused understanding of how much Jim Edwards and Laura hated him; his private contempt for Bowman, to whom he continued to give countenance and moral support; his setting down of the quarrels, intimate, disastrous, between Bowman and his wife, as the doctor retailed them to him, the woman dragging herself on her knees to beg for her freedom, and his callous refusals; backed by threat of the wide publicity of a scandalous divorce suit, with Thomas Gilbert as main witness. I turned to Worth and asked,

"When will Edwards be here?"

"Any minute now." Worth looked at me queerly, but I went on,

"You said he phoned from the ranch. Did he answer you in person—from out there?"

"That's what I told you, Jerry."

My searching gaze made nothing of the boy's impassive face; I plunged again into the diaries, running down a page, getting the heading of a sentence, not delaying to go further unless I struck something which seemed to me important, and each minute thinking of the strangeness of a man like this killing himself. It was in the 1916 volume, that I made a discovery which surprised an exclamation from me.

"What would you call this, Worth? Your father's way of making corrections?"

"Corrections?" Worth spoke without looking around. "My father never made corrections—in anything." It was said without animus—a simple statement of fact.

"But look here." I held toward him the book. There were three leaves gone; that meant six pages, and the entries covered May 31 and June 1. I had verified that before I spoke to him, noticing that the statement of the weather for May 31 remained at the foot of the last page left, while a run-over on the page beyond the missing ones had been marked out. It had nothing to do with the weather. As nearly as I could make out with the reading glass I held over it, the words were, "take the woman for no other than she appears."

"Worth," I urged, "give me your attention for a minute here. You say your father did not make corrections, but one of the diaries is cut. The records of two days are gone. Were those pages stolen?"

"How should I know?" said Worth, and added, helpfully, "Pity they didn't steal the whole lot. That would have been a relief."

There were voices and the sound of steps outside. I shoved the diary back into its place on the shelf, and turned to see Barbara at the broken door with Jim Edwards. She came in, her clear eyes a little wide, but the whole young personality of her quite composed. Edwards halted at the door, a haggard eye roving over the room, until it encountered the blood-stain on the rug, when it sheered abruptly, and fixed itself on Worth, who crossed to shake hands, with a quiet,

"Come in, won't you, Jim? Or would you rather go up to the house?"

Keenly I watched the man as he stood there struggling for words. There was color on his thin cheeks, high under the dark eyes; it made him look wild. The chill of the drive, or pure nervousness, had him shaking.

"Thank you—the house, I think," he said rather incoherently. Yet he lingered. "Barbara's been telling me," he said in that deep voice of his with the air of one who utters at random. "Worth,—had you thought that it might have been happening down here, right at the time we all sat at Tait's together?"

He was in a condition to spill anything. A moment more and we should have heard what it was that had him in such a grip of horror. But as I glanced at Worth, I saw him reply to the older man's question with a very slight but very perceptible shake of the head. It had nothing to do with what had been asked him; to any eye it said more plainly than words, "Don't talk; pull yourself together." I whirled to see how Edwards responded to this, and found our group had a new member. In the door stood a decent looking, round faced Chinaman. Edwards had drawn a little inside the threshold for him, but very little, and waited, still shaken, perturbed, hat in hand, apparently ready to leave as soon as the Oriental got out of his way.

"Hello," the yellow man saluted us.

"Hello, Chung," Worth rejoined, and added, "Looks good to see you again."

I was relieved to hear that. It showed me that the cook, anyhow, had not seen Worth last night in Santa Ysobel.

"Just now I hea' 'bout Boss." Chung's eye went straight to the stain on the rug, exactly as Edwards' had done, but it stopped there, and his Oriental impassiveness was unmoved. "Too bad," he concluded, thrust the fingers of one hand up the sleeve of the other and waited.

"Where you been all day?" I said quickly.

"My cousin' ranch."

"His cousin's got a truck farm over by Medlow—or used to have," Worth supplied, and Chung looked to him, instantly.

"You sabbee," he said hopefully. "I go iss mo'ning—all same any day—not find out 'bout Boss. Too bad. Too velly much bad." A pause, then, looking around at the four of us, "I get dinner?"

"We've all had something to eat, Chung," Worth said. "You go now fix room. Make bed. To-night, I stay; Mr. Boyne here stay; Mr. Edwards stay. Fix three rooms. Good fire."

"All 'ite," the chink would have ducked out then, Jim Edwards after him, but I stopped the proceedings with,

"Hold on a minute—while we're all together—tell us about that visitor Mr. Gilbert had last night." I was throwing a rock in the brush-pile in the chance of scaring out a rabbit. I was shooting the question at Chung, but my eye was on Edwards. He glared back at me for a moment, then couldn't stand the strain and looked away. At last the Chinaman spoke.

"Not see um. I go fix bed now."

"Hold on," again I stopped him. "Worth, tell him those beds can wait. Tell him it's all right to answer my questions."

"'S all 'ite?" Chung studied us in turn. I was keeping an inconspicious eye on Edwards as I reassured him. "'S all 'ite," he repeated with a falling inflection this time, and finished placidly, "You want know 'bout lady?"

"What's all this?" Edwards spoke low.

"About a lady who came to see Mr. Gilbert last night," I explained shortly; then, "Who was she, Chung?"

"Not see um good." The Chinaman shook his head gravely.

"Did she come here—to the study?" I asked. He nodded. Worth moved impatiently, and the Chinaman caught it. He fixed his eyes on Worth. I stepped between them. "Chung," I said sharply. "You knew the lady. Who was she?"

"Not see um good," he repeated, plainly reluctant. "She hold hand by face—cly, I think."

"Good God!" Edwards broke out startlingly. "If we're going to hear an account of all the women that Tom lectured and made cry—leave me out of it."

"One woman will do, for this time," I said to him drily, "if it's the right one," and he subsided, turning away. But he did not go. With burning eyes, he stood and listened while I cross-examined the unwilling Chung and got apparently a straight story showing that some woman had come to the side door of his master's house shortly after dinner Saturday night, walked to the study with that master, weeping, and that her voice when he heard it, sounded like that of some one he knew. I tried every way in the world to get him to be specific about this voice; did it sound like that of a young lady? an old lady? did he think it was some one he knew well, or only a little? had he been hearing it much lately? All the usual tactics; but Chung's placid obstinacy was proof against them. He kept shaking his head and saying over and over,

"No hear um good," until Barbara, standing watchfully by, said,

"Chung, you think that lady talk like this?"

As she spoke, after the first word, a change had come into her voice; it was lighter, higher, with a something in its character faintly reminiscent to my ear. And Chung bobbed his head quickly, nodding assent. In her mimicry he had recognized the tones of the visitor. I glanced at Edwards: he looked positively relieved.

"I'll go to the house, Worth," he said with more composure in his tone than I would have thought a few moments ago he could in any way summon. "You'll find me there." And he followed the Chinaman up the moonlit path.

CHAPTER XII

A MURDER

I STOOD at the door and watched until I saw first Chung's head come into the light on the kitchen porch, then Jim Edwards's black poll follow it. I waited until both had gone into the house and the door was shut, before I went back to Barbara and Worth. They were speaking together in low tones over at the hearth. The three of us were alone; and the blood-stain on the rug, out of sight there in the shadow beyond the table, would seem to cry out as a fourth.

"Barbara," I broke in across their talk, "who was the woman who came here to this place last night?"

She didn't answer me. Instead, it was Worth who spoke.

"Better come here and listen to what Bobs has been saying to me, Jerry, before you ask any questions."

I crossed and stood between the two young people.

"Well," I grunted; and though Barbara's face was white, her eyes big and black, she answered me bravely,

"Mr. Gilbert did not kill himself. Worth doesn't think so, either."

"What!" It was jolted out of me. After a moment's thought, I finished, "Then I've got to know who the woman was that visited this room last night."

For a long while she made no reply, studying Worth's profile as he stared steadily into the fire.

No signal passed between them, but finally she came to her decision and said,

"Mr. Boyne, ask Worth what he thinks I ought to say to that."

Instead, "Who was it, Worth?" I snapped, speaking to the back of the young man's head. The red came up into the girl's face, and her eyes flashed; but Worth merely shrugged averted shoulders.

"You can search me," he said, and left it there.

I looked from one to the other of these young people: Worth, whom I loved as I might have my own son had I been so fortunate as to possess one; this girl who had made a place of warmth for herself in my heart in less than a day, whose loyalty to my boy I was certain I might count on. How different this affair must look to them from the face it wore to me, an old police detective, who had bulled through many inquiries like this, the corpse itself, perhaps, lying in the back of the room, instead of the blood-stain we had there on the rug; what was practically the Third Degree being applied to relatives and friends; with the squalid prospect of a court trial ahead of us all. If they'd seen as much of this sort of thing as I had, they wouldn't be holding me up now, tying my hands that were so willing to help, by this fine-spun, overstrained notion of shielding a woman's name.

"Barbara," I began—I knew an appeal to the unaccountable Worth would get me nowhere—"the facts we've got to deal with here are a possible murder, with this lad the last person known—by us, of course—to have seen his father alive. We know, too, that they quarreled bitterly. We know all this. Outside people, men who are interested, and more or less hostile, were aware that Worth needed money—needs it yet, for that matter—a large sum. I suppose it is a question of time when it will be known that Worth came here last night; and when it is known, do you realize what it will mean?"

Worth had sat through this speech without the quiver of a muscle, and no word came from him as I paused for a reply. Little Barbara, big eyes boring into me as though to read all that was in the back of my mind, nodded gravely but did not speak. I crossed to the shelves and took down the diary whose leather back bore the date of 1916. As I opened it, finding the place where its pages had been removed, I continued,

"You and I know—we three here know—" I included Worth in my statement—"that the crime was neither suicide nor patricide; but it is likely we must have proof of that fact. Unless we find the murderer—"

"But the motive—there would have to be motive."

Barbara struck right at the core of the thing. She didn't check at the mere material facts of how a murder could have been done, who might have had opportunity. The fundamental question of why it should have been was her immediate interest.

"I believe I've the motive here," I said and thrust the mutilated volume into her hand. "Some one stole these leaves out of Mr. Gilbert's diary. The books are filled with intimate details of the affairs of people—things which people prefer should not be known—names, details and dates written out completely. It's likely murder was done last night to get possession of those pages."

She went to the desk and glanced over the book; not the minute examination with the reading glass which I had given it; that mere flirt of a glance which, when I had first noticed it the night before at Tait's, skimming across that description of Clayte, had seemed so inadequate. Then she turned to me.

"Mr. Gilbert cut these out himself," she pronounced.

That brought Worth's head up and his face around to stare at her.

"You say my father removed something he had written?" he asked. Barbara nodded. "He never changed a decision—and those books were his decisions."

"Then this wasn't a correction, but he cut it out. Can't you see, Mr. Boyne? Those leaves were removed by a man who respected the book and was as careful in his mutilation of it as he was in its making. It is precisely written—I'm referring to workmanship, not its literary quality—carefully margined, evenly indented on the paragraph beginnings. And so, in this removal of three leaves, the cutting was done with a sharp knife drawn along the edge of a ruler—" I picked up from where they lay on the blotting pad, a small pearl-handled knife, its sharp blade open, and the ruler I had seen when looking down from the skylight, and placed them before her. She nodded and continued,

"There is a bit of margin left so no other leaves can be loosened by this removal. The marking out of the run-over has been neatly ruled, done so recently that the ink is not yet black—done with that ink in the stand. It was blotted with this." She lifted a hand-blotter to show me the print of a line of ink. There were other markings on the face of the soft paper, and I took it eagerly. Barbara smiled.

"You will get little from that," she said. I had not even seen her give it attention. "Scattered words—and parts of words, blotted frequently as they were written. Perhaps, with care, we might learn something, but we can turn more easily to the last pages of his diary and—"

"There are no last pages," I interrupted. "The 1920 book is missing."

"Gone—stolen?" she exclaimed. It brought a smile to my face. For the first time in my experience of this pretty, little bunch of brains, she had hazarded a guess.

"Gone," I admitted coolly—a bit sarcastically. "I've no reason to say stolen."

"But—yes, you have—you have, Mr. Boyne! If it is gone, it was stolen. Is it gone—are you sure it is gone?" Eagerly her eyes were searching desk, cabinet, the shelf where the other diaries made their long row. I satisfied her on that score.

"I have searched the study thoroughly; it is not in this room."

"Was here last night," Worth cut in. "I saw it on the desk."

"And was stolen last night," Barbara reaffirmed, quickly. "These books are too big to be slipped into a pocket, so we can't believe it was left upon Mr. Gilbert's person; and he wouldn't lend it—wouldn't willingly let it go from his possession. So it was stolen; and the man who stole it—killed him." She shuddered.

That was going too swift for me to follow, but I saw on Worth Gilbert's face his acceptance of it. Either conviction of Barbara's infallibility, or some knowledge locked up inside his own chest, made him certain the diary had been stolen, and the thief was his father's murderer. In a flash, I remembered his words, "putting every damn' word of our row into it," and I shot straight at him,

"Did you take that book, Worth?"

He only shook his head and answered,

"You heard what Bobs said, Jerry."

If he took the book he killed his father; that was Barbara's inference, Worth's acceptance. I threw back my shoulders to cast off the suspicion, then reached across to place my fingers under the girl's hand and pull from it the only record of that last written page, the blotter.

"Will you read me that?" I asked her. "Every word and part of a word—every letter?"

Her eyes smiled into mine with a reassurance that was like balm. Worth rose and found her a hand-glass on the mantel, passing it to her, and with this to reverse the scrawlings, she read and I wrote down in my memorandum book two complete words, two broken words and five single letters picked from overlying marks that were too confused to be decipherable. Though the three of us struggled with them, they held no meaning.

Worth's interest quickly ceased.

"I'll join Jim Edwards in the house," he said, but I stopped him.

"One minute, Worth. There was a woman visitor here last night. It would seem she carried away with her the diary of 1920 and three leaves from the book of 1916. I want you—you and Barbara—to tell me what you know that happened here in Santa Ysobel on the dates of the missing pages, May 31 and June 1, 1916."

Barbara accepted the task, turning that wonderful cinematograph memory back, and murmured,

"I never tried recollecting on just a bare date this way, but—" then glanced around at me and finished —"nothing happened to me in Santa Ysobel then, because I wasn't in Santa Ysobel. I was in San Francisco and—"

"And I was in Flanders, so that lets me out," Worth broke in brusquely. "I'll go into the house."

"Wait, Worth." I placed a hand on his shoulder. "Go on, Barbara; you had thought of something."

"Yes. Father died in January of that year, and in March I had to vacate the house. It had been sold, and they wanted to fix it over. I left Santa Ysobel on the eighteenth of March, but they didn't get into the house until June first."

Again Worth interrupted.

"Which jogs my memory for an unexciting detail." He smiled enigmatically. "I was jilted June first."

"In Flanders?" How many times had this lad been jilted?

"No. Right here. I wasn't here of course, but the letter which did the trick was written here, and bore that date—June one, 1916."

"How do you get the date so pat?"

"It was handed me by the mail orderly—I was on the Verdun sector then—on the morning of the Fourth of July. Remember the date the letter was written because of the quick time it made. Most of our mail took from six weeks to eternity. What are you smiling at, Bobs?"

"Just a little—you don't mind, do you?—at your saying you remember Ina's letter by the quick time it made in reaching you."

"Who bought your house, Barbara?" I asked her.

"Dr. Bowman—or rather Mrs. Bowman's uncle bought it and gave it to her."

"And they went in on the first of June, 1916?" I was all excitement, turning the pages of the diary to get to certain points I remembered. "What can either one of you tell me about the state of affairs at that time between Dr. Bowman and his wife—and that man who was just in here—Jim Edwards?"

Worth turned a hostile back; Barbara seemed to shrink in her chair. I hated like a whipping to pull this sort of stuff on them, but I knew that Barbara's knowledge of Worth's danger would reconcile her to whatever painful thing must be done, and I had to know who was that visitor of last night.

"Is that—that stuff in those damnable books?" I saw the hunch of Worth's broad shoulders.

"Some of it is—some of it has been cut out," I replied.

"And you connect Jim Edwards with this crime?"

"I don't connect him—he connects himself—by them, and by his manner."

"Burn them!" He faced me, came over and reached for the book. "Dump the whole rotten mess into the fire, Jerry, and be done with it."

"Easy said, but that would sure be a short cut to trouble. Tell me, I've got to know, if you think this man Edwards—under great provocation—capable of —well, of killing a fellow creature."

"Jerry," Worth took the book out of my hand and laid it on the table, "what you want to do is to forget this—dirt—that you've been reading, and go at this thing without prejudice. If you open any trails and they lead in my direction, don't be afraid to follow them. This thing of trying to find a criminal in some one that my father has already deeply injured—some one that he's made life a hell for—so that suspicion needn't be directed to me, makes me sick. If I'd allow you to do it, I'd be yellow clear through."

That was about the longest speech I'd heard Worth Gilbert make since his return from France. And he meant every word of it, too; but it didn't suit me. This "Hew to the line" stuff is all right until the chips begin whacking the head of your friend. In this case there wasn't a doubt in my mind that when a breath of suspicion got out that Thomas Gilbert had not killed himself, that minute would see the first finger point at Thomas Gilbert's son as the murderer. So I grumbled,

"Just the same, Edwards has something on his mind about last night."

"He has—and it's pretty nearly tearing him to pieces," Worth admitted, but would go no further.

"He was here last night, I'm sure—and Mrs. Bowman was with him," I ventured.

Barbara, who had been sitting through this her eyes on Worth, turned from him to me and pronounced, gently,

"Yes, he was here, and Laura was with him."

"Bobs!" Worth spoke so sternly that she glanced up startled. "I'll not stand for you throwing suspicion on Jim."

"Did I—do that?" her lip trembled. Worth's eyes were on the fire.

"Don't quarrel with the girl," I remonstrated. Barbara had told me the visitor; I covered my elation with, "She's only looking out for your safety."

"I can look out for myself," curtly. He turned hard eyes on us. It made me feel put away from him, chucked out from his friendship. "And I never quarreled with anybody in my life. Sometimes—" he turned from one to the other of us, speaking slowly, "Sometimes I seem to antagonize people, for no reason that I can see; and sometimes I fight; but I never quarrel."

"No offense intended—or taken," I assured him hastily. My heart was full of his danger, and I told myself that it was his misery spoke, and not the true Worth Gilbert. But a very pale and subdued Barbara said tremulously,

"I guess I'd better go home now," suggesting, after the very slightest pause, "Mr. Boyne can take me."

"Don't, Bobsie." Worth's voice was gentle again, but absent. It sounded as though he had already forgotten both of us, and our possible cause of offense. "Go to the house with Jerry. I'll bar the door and follow."

"Can't I help with that?" I offered.

"No. Eddie will give me a hand if I need it. Go on. I'll be with you in a minute."

CHAPTER XIII

DR. BOWMAN

BUT it was considerably more than a minute before Worth followed us to the house. We walked slowly, talking; when I looked back from the kitchen porch, Worth had already come outside, and I thought Eddie Hughes was with him, though I heard no voices and couldn't be sure on account of the shrubbery between.

Getting into the house we found that Chung had the downstairs all opened up through, lights going, heat turned on from the basement furnace; everywhere that tended, homelike appearance a competent servant gives a place. On the hall table as we passed, I noticed a doctorish top coat, with a primly folded muffler laid across it.

"Dr. Bowman is here," Barbara said hardly above her breath.

We listened; no sound of voices from the living room; then I got the tramp of feet that moved back and forth in there. We opened the door, and there were the two men; a queer proposition!

Bowman had taken a chair pretty well in the middle of the room. It was Jim Edwards whose feet I had heard as he roamed about. No word was going between them; apparently they hadn't spoken to each other at all; the looks that met or avoided were those strange looks of persons who live in lengthened and what might be termed intimate hostility.

"Ah—Boyne—isn't it?" Bowman greeted me; I thought our coming relieved the situation. He shook hands, then turned to Barbara with, "Mrs. Thornhill said you were here; I told her I would bring you back with me."

I rather wondered not to hear him insist on being taken at once to the study, but his next words gave the reason. He'd reached Santa Ysobel too late for the inquest itself, but not too late to make what he informed us was a thorough investigation of everything it treated of.

Barbara and I found places on the davenport; Edwards prowled up and down the other end of the room, openly in torment. Those stormy black eyes of his were seldom off Bowman, while the doctor's gray, heavy-lidded gaze never got beyond the toes of the restless man's moving boots. He had begun a grumbling tale of the coroner's incompetence and neglect to reopen the inquest when he, the family physician, arrived, as though that were important, when Worth came in.

Instantly the doctor was on his feet, had paced up to the new master of the house, and began pumping his arm in a long handshake, while he passed out those platitudes of condolence a man of his sort deals in at such a time. The stuff I'd been reading in those diaries had told me what was the root and branch of his friendship with the dead man; it made the hair at the back of my neck lift to hear him boasting of it in Jim Edwards' presence, and know what I knew. "And, my dear boy," he finished, "they tell me you've not been to view the body—yet. I thought perhaps you'd like to go—with me. I can have my machine here in a minute. No?" as Worth declined with a wordless shake of the head.

I hoped he'd leave then; but he didn't. Instead, he turned back to his chair, explaining,

"If Mrs. Thornhill's cook hadn't phoned me, when Mrs. Thornhill had a second collapse last night, I suppose I should be in San Francisco still. The coroner seemed to think there was no necessity for having competent medical testimony as to the time of death, and the physical condition of the deceased. I should have been wired for. The inquest should have been delayed until I arrived. The way the thing was managed was disgraceful."

"It was merciful." Jim Edwards spoke as though unwillingly, in a muttered undertone. Evidently it was the first word he'd addressed to Bowman—if he could be said to address him now, as he finished, "I hadn't thought of an inquest. Yet of course there'd be one in a case of suicide."

Bowman only heard and wholly misconstrued him, snatching at the concluding words,

"Of course it was suicide. Done with his own weapon, taken from the holster where we know it always hung, fully loaded. The muzzle had been pressed so close against the breast when the cartridge exploded that the woolen vest had taken fire. I should say it had smouldered for some time; there was a considerable hole burned in the cloth. The flesh around the wound was powder-scarred."

Worth took it like a red Indian. I could see by the glint of his eye as it flickered over the doctor's face, the smooth white hands, the whole smooth personality, that the boy disliked, and had always disliked him. Yet he listened silently.

I rather hoped by leading questions to get Bowman to express the opinion that Thomas Gilbert had been killed in the small hours of the morning. Circumstances then would have fitted in with Eddie Hughes. Eddie Hughes was to me the most acceptable murderer in sight. But no—nothing would do him but to stick to the hour the coroner had accepted.

"Medical science cannot determine closer than that," he was very final. "The death took place within an hour preceding midnight."

"You are positive it couldn't be this morning?" I asked.

"Positive."

Well, Dr. Bowman's testimony, if accepted at the value the doctor himself placed upon it, would clear Worth of suspicion, for the lad was with me at Tait's from a few minutes past ten until after one; and Jim Edwards, now pacing the floor so restlessly, had also been there the greater part of that time. I had had too much experience with doctor's guesses based on *rigor mortis* to let it affect my views.

In the minute of silence, we could hear Chung moving about at the back of the house. The doctor spoke querulously.

"Never expect anything of a Chinaman, but I should think when the chauffeur found the body he might have had sense enough to summon friends of the family. He could have phoned me—I was only in San Francisco."

"He could have phoned me at the ranch," Jim Edwards' deep voice came in.

"You? Why should he phone for you?" Bowman wheeled on him at last. "I was the man's physician, as well as his close friend. Everybody knows you weren't on good terms with him. Gad! You wouldn't be here in this house to-night, if he were alive."

In the sort of silence that comes when some one's been suddenly struck in the face, Worth crossed to Edwards and laid an arm along his shoulders.

"I've asked Jim to stay in my place, here, in my house, while I'm away over Monday—and he can do as he likes about whom he chooses to have around."

Bowman gradually got to his feet, his face a study.

"I see," he said. "Then I'll not trespass on your time any longer. I felt obliged to offer my services . . . patients of mine . . . for years . . . in affliction . . ." a gleam of anger came into his fishy eyes. "I've been met with damned insolence. . . . Claiming of the house before your father's decently in his grave." He jerked fully erect. "Leave your affairs in the hands of that degenerate. If he doesn't do you dirt, you'll be the first he's let off! Come, Miss Barbara," to the girl who sat beside me, looking on mutely observant.

"Thank you, doctor." She answered him as tranquilly as though no voice had been raised in anger in that room. "I think I'll stay a little longer. Jim will take me home."

The doctor glared and stalked out. To the last I think he was expecting some one to stop him and apologize. I suppose this was what Worth described naïvely as "antagonizing people without intending to." Well, it might not be judicious; I certainly was glad the doctor was so sure of the time at which his friend Gilbert had met death; yet I couldn't but enjoy seeing him get his. As soon as the man's back was turned, Edwards beckoned Barbara to the window. Worth and I left them talking together there in low tones, he to get something he wanted from a case in the hall, where he called me to the phone, saying long distance wanted me. While I was waiting for my connection (Central, as usual, having gotten me, now couldn't get the other party) the two came from the living room and Barbara said "Good night" to us in passing.

"Those two seem to have something on hand," I commented as they went out. "The little girl gave Bowman one for himself—in the nicest possible way. Don't wonder Edwards likes her for it."

"Poor Laura Bowman! Her friends take turns giving that bloodless lizard she's tied to, one for himself any time they can," Worth said. "My mother used to handle the doctor something like that; and now it's Barbara—little Bobsie Wallace—God bless her!"

He went on into the dining room. I looked after his unconscious, departing figure and thought he deserved a good licking. Why couldn't he have spoken that way to the girl herself? Why hadn't he taken her home, instead of leaving it to Edwards? Then I got my call and answered,

"This is Boyne. Put them through."

In a minute came Roberts' voice.

"Hello, Mr. Boyne?"

"Yes. What you got?"

"Telegram—Hicks—Los Angeles. He's located Steve Skeels—"

"Read me the wire," I broke in.

"All right." A pause, then, " 'Skeels arrived here from 'Frisco this morning shall I arrest?' "

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Wire him to keep Steve under surveillance and await instructions. Tell him not to lose him. Get it, Roberts? Hustle it. I'll be in by nine. Good-by," and I hung up.

I looked around; Worth had gone into the dining room; I stepped to the door and saw him kneeling before an open lower door of the built-in sideboard, and noted that the compartment had been steel lined and Yale-locked, making a sort of safe. A lamp at the end of an extension wire stood on the floor beside him; he looked around at me over his shoulder as I put my head in to say,

"Stock in your old suitcase has gone up a notch, Worth. We've caught Skeels."

"So soon?" was all he said. But my news seemed to decide something for him; with a sharp gesture of finality, he put into his breast pocket the package of papers he had been looking at.

When a little later, Edwards came in, Worth was waiting for him in the hall.

"Do we go now?" the older man asked, wincing. Worth nodded.

"Take your machine, Jim," he said. "We can park it at Fuller's and walk back from there. Boyne's roadster is in our garage."

"Anything wrong with Eddie Hughes?" Edwards asked as he stepped in to get his driving gloves. "I passed him out there headed for town lugging a lot of freight, and the fellow growled like a dog when I spoke to him."

"I fired him. Come on, Jim—let's get out of this."

"Hold on, Worth," I took a hand. "Fired Hughes? When?"

"While I was fixing up that door—after you and Bobs came to the house."

"What in God's name for?" I asked in exasperation.

"For giving me back talk," said the youth who never quarreled with any one.

He and Edwards tramped out together. I realized that the hostile son and an alienated friend had gone for a last look at the clay that had yesterday been Thomas Gilbert. Of course Worth would do that before he left Santa Ysobel. But would Edwards go in with him—or was he only along to drive the machine? It might be worth my while to know. But I could ask to-morrow; it wasn't worth a tired man's waiting up for. We must make an early start in the morning. I went upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XIV

SEVEN LOST DAYS

INSTEAD of driving up to San Francisco with Worth and Barbara, the next morning, I was headed south at a high rate of speed. Sitting in the Pullman smoker, going over what had happened and what I had made of it, vainly studying a small, blue blotter with some senseless hieroglyphics reversed upon it, I wasn't at all sure that this move of mine was anywhere near the right one. But the thing hit me so quick, had to be decided in a flash, and my snap judgment never was good.

We were all at breakfast there at the Gilbert house when I got the phone that those boobs down in Los Angeles had let Skeels slip through their fingers. I could see no way but to go myself. When I went out to retrieve my hand bag from the roadster, there was Barbara already in the seat. I delayed a minute to explain to her. She was full of eager interest; it seemed to her that Skeels ducking the detectives that way was more than clever—almost worthy of a wonder man.

"Slickest thing I ever knew," I grumbled. "You can gamble I wouldn't be going south after him if Skeels hadn't shown himself too many for the Hicks agency—and they're one of the best in the business."

Worth came out and settled himself at the wheel; he and Edwards exchanged a last, low-toned word; and they were ready to be off. Barbara leaned towards me with shining eyes.

"Perhaps," she said, "Skeels might even be Clayte!" then the roadster whisked her away.

The bulk of Worth Gilbert's fortune was practically tied up in this affair. Even as the Pullman carried me Los Angeles-ward, that boy was getting in to San Francisco, going to the bank, and turning over to them capital that represented not only his wealth but his honor. If we failed to trace this money, he was a discredited fool. Yes, I had done right to come.

So far on that side. Then apprehension began to mutter within me about the situation at Santa Ysobel. How long would that coroner's verdict of suicide satisfy the public? How soon would some seepage of fact indicate that the death was murder and set the whole town to looking for a murderer? The minute this happened, the real criminal would take alarm and destroy evidence I might have gathered if I had stayed by the case. I promised myself that it should be simply "there and back" with me in the Skeels matter.

This is the way it looked to me in the Pullman; then —once in Los Angeles—I allowed myself to get hot telling the Hicks people what I thought of them, expaining how I'd have run the chase, and wound up by giving seven days to it—seven precious, irreclaimable days—while everything lay wide open there in the north, and I couldn't get any satisfactory word from the office, and none of any sort from Worth.

That Skeels trail kept me to it, with my tongue hanging out; again and again I seemed to have him; every time I missed him by an hour or so; and that convinced me that he was straining every nerve, and that he probably had the whole of the loot still with him. At last, I seemed to have him in a perfect trap —Ensenada, on the Peninsula. You get into and out of Ensenada by steamboat only, except back to the mines on foot or donkey. The two days I had to wait over in San Diego for the boat which would follow the one Skeels had taken were a mighty uneasy time. If I'd imagined for a moment that he wasn't on the dodge—that he was there openly—I'd have wired the Mexican authorities, and had him waiting for me in jail. But the Mexican officials are a rotten lot; it seemed to me best to go it alone.

What I found in Ensenada was that Skeels had been there, quite publicly, under his own name; he had come alone and departed with a companion, Hinch Dial, a drill operator from the mines, a transient, a pick-up laborer, seemingly as close-mouthed as Silent Steve himself. Steve had come on one steamer and the two had left on the next. That north-bound boat we passed two hours off Point Loma was carrying Skeels and his pal back to San Diego!

Again two days lost, waiting for the steamer back. And when I got to San Diego, the trail was stone cold. I had sent Worth almost daily reports in care of my office, not wanting them to lie around at Santa Ysobel during the confusion of the funeral and all; but even before I went to Ensenada, telegrams from Roberts had informed me that these reports could not be delivered as Worth had not been at the office, and telephone messages to Santa Ysobel and the Palace Hotel had failed to locate him. When I believed I had Skeels firmly clasped in the jaws of the Ensenada trap, I had sent a complete report of my doings up to that time, and the optimistic outlook then, to Barbara with instructions for her to get it to Worth. She would know where he was.

But she hadn't. Her reply, waiting at San Diego for me, a delicious little note that somehow lightened the bitterness of my disappointment over Skeels, told me that she had seen Worth at the funeral, almost a week ago now, but only for a minute; that she had supposed he had joined me on the Skeels chase; and she would now try to hunt him up and deliver my report. Roberts, too, had a line in one of his reports that Worth had called for the suitcase on the Monday I left and had neither returned it nor been in the office since.

I worried not at all over Worth; if he wanted to play hide and seek with Dykeman's spotters, he was thoroughly capable of looking after himself; but in the Skeels matter, I did then what I should have done in the first place, of course; turned the work over to subordinates and headed straight home.

I reached San Francisco pretty well used up. It was nearly the middle of the forenoon next day when I got to my desk and found it piled high with mail that had accumulated in my absence. Roberts had looked after what he could, and sorted the rest, ready for me. Everything concerning the Clayte case was in one basket. As Roberts handed it to me, he explained.

"The Van Ness bank attorney—Cummings—has been keeping tabs on you tight, Mr. Boyne. Here every day—sometimes twice. Wants to know the minute you're back."

I grunted and dived into the letters. Nothing interesting. Responses acknowledging receipts of my early inquiries. Roberts lingered.

"Well?" I shot at him. He moved uneasily as he asked.

"Did you wire him when you were coming back?"

"Cummings? No. Why?"

"He telephoned in just before you came saying that he'd be right up to see you. I told him you hadn't returned. He laughed and hung up."

"All right, Roberts. Send him in when he comes." I dismissed the secretary. Cummings was keeping tabs on me with a vengeance. What was on his chest?

I didn't need to wait long to find out. In another minute he was at my door greeting me in an off-hand, "Hello, Boyne. Ready to jump into your car and go around with me to see Dykeman?"

"Just got down to the office, Cummings," I watched him, trying to figure out where I stood and where he stood after this week's absence. "Haven't seen Worth Gilbert yet. What's the rush with Dykeman?"

"You'll find out when you get there."

Not very friendly, seeing that Cummings had been Worth's lawyer in the matter, and aside from that queer scene in my office, there'd been no actual break. He stood now, not really grinning at me, but with an amused look under that bristly mustache, and suggested,

"So you haven't seen young Gilbert?"

The tone was so significant that I gave him a quick glance of inquiry as I said,

"No. What about him?"

"Put on your coat and come along. We can talk on the way," he replied, and I went with him to the street, dug little Pete out of the bootblack stand and herded him into the roadster to drive us. Cummings gave the order for North Beach, and as we squirmed through and around congested downtown traffic, headed for the Stockton Street tunnel, I waited for the lawyer to begin. When it came, it was another startling question,

"Didn't find Skeels in the south, eh?"

I hadn't thought they'd carry their watching and trailing of us so far. I answered that question with another,

"When did you see or hear from Worth Gilbert last?"

"Not since the funeral," he said promptly, "the day before the funeral—a week ago to-day, to be exact. I ran down to make my inventory then; as administrator, you know."

He looked at me so significantly that I echoed,

"Yes, I know."

"Do you? How much?" His voice was hard and dry; it didn't sound good to me.

"See here," I put it to him, as my clever little driver dodged in and out through the narrow lanes between Pagoda-like shops of Chinatown, avoiding the steep hill streets by a diagonal through the Italian quarter on Columbus Avenue. "If there's anything you think I ought to be told, put me wise. I suppose you raised that money for Worth—the seventy-two thousand that was lacking, I mean?"

"I did not."

I turned the situation over and over in my mind, and at last asked cautiously, "Worth did get the money to make up the full amount, didn't he?"

We had swerved again to the north, where the Powell car-line curves into Bay Street, and were headed direct for the wharves. Cummings watched me out of the corners of his eyes, a look that bored in most unpleasantly, while he cross examined,

"So you don't know where he raised that money—or how—or when? You don't even know that he did raise it? Is that the idea?"

I gave him look for look, but no answer. An indecisive slackening of the machine, and Little Pete asked,

"Where now, sir?"

"You can see it," Cummings pointed. "The tall building. Hit the Embarcadero, then turn to your right; a block to Mason Street."

So close to the dock that ships lay broadside before its doors, moored to the piles by steel cables, the Western Cereal Company plant scattered its mills and warehouses over two city blocks. Freight trains ran through arcades into the buildings to fetch and carry its products; great trucks, some gas driven, some with four- and six-horse teams, loaded sacks or containers that shot in endless streams through well worn chutes, or emptied raw materials that would shortly be breakfast foods into iron conveyors that sucked it up and whined for more. It was a place of aggressive activity among placid surroundings, this plant of Dykeman's, for its setting was the Italian fisherman's home district; little frame shacks, before which they mended their long, brown nets, or stretched them on the sidewalks to dry; Fisherman's Wharf and its lateen rigged, gayly painted hulls, was under the factory windows.

We pulled up before the door of a building separate from any of the mills or warehouses, and I followed Cummings through a corridor, past many doors of private offices, to the large general office. Here a young man at a desk against the rail lent Cummings respectful attention; the lawyer asked something in a low tone, and was answered,

"Yes, sir. Waiting for you. Go right through."

Down the long room with its rattling typewriters, its buzz of clerks and salesmen we went. Cummings was a little ahead of me, when he checked a moment to bow to some one over at a desk. I followed his glance. The girl he had spoken to turned her back almost instantly after she had returned his greeting; but I couldn't be mistaken. There might be more than one figure with that slim, half girlish grace about it, and other hair as lustrously blue-black, but none could be wound around a small head quite so shapely, carried with so blossomlike a toss. It was Barbara Wallace.

So this was where her job was. Strange I had not known this fact of grave importance. I went on past her unconscious back, left her working at her loose-leaf ledgers, beside her adding machine, my mind a whirl of ugly conjecture. Dykeman's employee; that would instantly and very painfully clear up a score of perplexing questions. Dykeman would need no detectives on my trail to tell him of my lack of success in the Skeels chase. Lord! I had sent her as concise a report as I could make—to her, for Worth. I walked on stupidly. In front of the last door in the big room, Cummings halted and spoke low.

"Boyne, you and I are both in the employ of the

Van Ness Avenue Bank. We're somewhat similarly situated in another quarter; I'm representing the Gilbert estate, and you've been retained by Worth Gilbert."

I grunted some sort of assent.

"I brought you here to listen to what the bank crowd has to say, but when they get done, I've something to tell you about that young employer of yours. You listen to them—then you listen to me—and you'll know where you stand."

"I'll talk with you as soon as I get through here, Cummings."

"Be sure you do that little thing," significantly, and we went in.

CHAPTER XV

AT DYKEMAN'S OFFICE

WE found Whipple with Dykeman. I had always liked the president of the Van Ness Avenue Bank well enough; one of the large, smooth, amiable sort, not built to withstand stress of weather, apt to be rather helpless before it. He seemed now mighty upset and worried. Dykeman looked at me with hard eyes that searched me, but on the whole he was friendly in his greeting and inquiries as to my health.

While I was getting out of my coat and stowing it, making a great deal of the process so as to gain time, I saw Cummings was exchanging low spoken words with the two of them. I tried to keep my mind on these men before me and why I was with them, but all the while it would be running back to the knockout blow of seeing that girl in Dykeman's place. She was double-crossing Worth! I might have grinned at the idea that I'd let myself be fooled by a pair of big, expressive, wistful, merry black eyes; but I had seen the look in those same eyes when they were turned on my boy; to think she'd look at him like that, and sell him out, was against nature. It was hurting me beyond all reason.

Whipple asked me about my trip south as though it was the most public thing in the world and he knew its every detail, and accepted my reply that I couldn't take one man's pay and report to another, with,

"Just so, Mr. Boyne. But your agency is retained —regularly, year by year—by our bank. And our bank has given over none of its rights—I should say duties—in regard to the Clayte case. We stand ready to assist any one whose behavior seems to us that of a law-abiding citizen. We don't want to advance any criminality. We can't strike hands with outlaws—"

"Tell him about the suitcase, Whipple," Dykeman broke in impatiently, rather spoiling the president's oratorical effect. "Tell him about the suitcase."

The suitcase! Was this one of the things Barbara Wallace had let out to her employer? She could have done so. She knew all about it.

"One moment, please," I snapped. "I've been away for a week, Mr. Whipple. I don't know a thing of what you're talking about. Did Captain Gilbert fail to meet his engagement with you Monday morning?"

Whipple shook his head.

"Mr. Dykeman wants you told about the suitcase," he said. "I'd like to have Knapp here when we go into that."

Dykeman picked up the end of a speaking-tube and barked into it,

"Send those men in." In the moment's delay, we all sat uneasily mute. Knapp came in with Anson. As they nodded to us and settled into chairs, two or three others joined us. Nothing was said about this filling out of the numbers, but to me it meant serious business, with Worth Gilbert its motive.

"Get it over, can't you?" I said, looking about from one to the other of the men, all directors in the bank.

"I understand that Captain Gilbert met his engagement with you; was he short of the sum agreed?" Again Whipple shook his head.

"Captain Gilbert walked into the bank at exactly ten o'clock Monday morning. The uh—uh—unusual arrangement—contract, to call it so—that we'd made with him concerning the defalcation would have expired in a few seconds, and I think I may say," he looked around at the others, "that we should not have been sorry to have it do so. But he brought the sum agreed on."

I drew a great sigh of relief. Worth's bargain was complete; he was done with these men, anyhow. I was half out of my chair when Whipple said, sharply for him,

"Sit down, Mr. Boyne." And Dykeman almost drowned it in his,

"Wait, there, Boyne! We're not through with you."

"There's more to tell," Whipple continued. "Captain Gilbert brought that eight hundred thousand cash and securities in a—er—in a very strange way."

"What d'you mean, strange way? airplane or submarine?" I growled.

"He brought it," Whipple's words marched out of him like a solemn procession, "in a brown, sole-leather suitcase."

"*With* brass trimmings," Dykeman supplemented, and leaned back in his chair with an audible "Ah-h-h!" of satisfaction.

If ever a poor devil was flabbergasted, it was the head of the Boyne agency at that moment. I had a fellow feeling for that Mazeppa party who was tied in his birthday suit to the back of a wild horse. Locoed broncos were more amenable to rein than Worth Gilbert. So that was why he wanted that suitcase—"had a use for it," he'd put it; insisted on an order to be able to get it if I wasn't at my office; wanted it to shove back at these scary bank officials, with his own money for the payment inside. No wonder Whipple called him an "outlaw"!

"Get the idea, do you, Boyne?" Anson lunged at me in his ponderous way. "The rest of us thought 'twas a poor joke, but Knapp and Whipple had both seen that suitcase before—and recognized it."

"Yes," said Knapp quietly. "It chanced I saw it go through the door that last day, when it had nearly a million of our money in it. And here it was—" his voice broke off.

"Certainly startling," Cummings spoke directly at me, "for them to see it come back in Worth Gilbert's hands, with the same kind of filling, less one hundred and eighty seven thousand dollars. Of course, I didn't know the identity of the suitcase until they'd given Gilbert his receipt and he was gone."

"Oh, they accepted his money?" I said, and every man in the room looked sheepish, except Cummings who didn't need to, and Dykeman who was too mad to. He shouted at me,

"Yes, we took it; and you're going to tell us where he got that suitcase."

"What have your own detectives—those you hired on the side—to say about it?" I countered on him, and saw instantly that the Whipple end of the crowd hadn't known of Dykeman's spotters and trailers.

"Well, why not?" Dykeman shrilled. "Why not?

Who wouldn't shadow that crook? One hundred and eighty seven thousand dollars! Worked us like suckers—come-ons—!" he choked up and began to cough. Cummings came in where he left off.

"See here, Boyne; we don't want to antagonize you. You've said from the first that this crime was a conspiracy—a big thing—directed by brains on the outside. Clayte was the tool. Whose tool was he? That's what we want to know." And Anson trundled along,

"These men who have been in the war get a contempt for law, there's no doubt about it. Captain Gilbert might—"

"No names!" Whipple's hand went up in protest. "No accusations, gentlemen, please; Mr. Boyne—this is a dreadful thing. But, really, Captain Gilbert's manner was very strange. I might say he—"

"Swaggered," supplied Cummings coolly as the president's voice lapsed.

"Well," Whipple accepted it, "he swaggered in and put it all over us. There he was, a man fresh from the deathbed of a suicide father; that father's funeral yet to occur. I, personally, hadn't the heart to question him or raise objections. I was dazed."

"Dazed," Dykeman snapped up the word and worried it, as a dog worries a bone. "Of course, we were all dazed. It was so open, so shameless—that's why he got by with it. Making use of his position as heir, less than forty eight hours after his father was shot."

"After his father shot himself," Whipple's lowered tone was a plea. "After his father shot himself."

"Huh!" snorted Dykeman. "If a man shoots himself, he's been shot, hasn't he? Hell! What's the use of whipping the devil round the stump that way? Boyne, you can stand with us, or you can fight us."

"Boyne's with us—of course he's with us," Whipple broke in, his words a good deal more confident than his tone or the look of his face.

"Well, then," Dykeman ground out, "when our thief of a teller splits that one hundred and eighty seven thousand with his man Gilbert—shut up, Whipple—shut up! You can't stop me—we're going to know about it. We'll get them both then, and send them across. And we'll recover one hundred and eighty seven thousand dollars that belongs to the Van Ness Avenue bank."

"Good night!" I got to my feet. "This lets me out. I can't deal with men who make a scrap of paper of their contracts as quick as you gentlemen do."

"Stop, Boyne—you haven't got it all," Dykeman ordered me.

"Yes, wait, Mr. Boyne," Whipple came in. "You haven't a full understanding of the enormity of this young man's action. Mr. Cummings has something to tell you which, I think, will—"

"Nothing Mr. Cummings can say," I shut them off, "will alter the fact that I am employed by Captain Worth Gilbert at your recommendation—at your own recommendation—that I have been away more than a week on his business, and have not yet had an opportunity to report to him personally. When I've seen him, I'll be ready to talk to you."

"You'll talk now or never—" Dykeman's shrill threat was interrupted by the shriller bell of the telephone. He yanked the instrument to him, and the "Hello!" he cried into it had the snap of an oath. He looked up and shoved the thing in my direction. "Calling for you, Boyne," he snarled.

There was deathly stillness in the room, so that the whir of the great stones in the mill came to us insistently. I stood there, they all watching me, and spoke into the transmitter.

"This is Boyne."

"Hold the receiver close to your ear so it won't leak words." The warning wasn't needed; I thought I knew the voice. "Press the transmitter close to your chest. Listen—don't talk; don't say a word in reply to me. I'm in the telephone booth outside. I must see you just as soon as I can. I'll be at the Little Italy restaurant—you know, don't you? on Fisherman's Wharf—in ten minutes. If you can come, and alone, find me there. I'll wait an hour. If you can't come now, you *must* see me this evening after working hours."

"I'll come now," I raised the transmitter to say, and quickly over the wire came the answer,

"I told you not to speak—in there! This is Barbara Wallace."

CHAPTER XVI

A LUNCHEON

I WENT away from there.

Looking about me, I had guessed that pretty much every man in the room believed that it was Worth Gilbert with whom I had been talking over the phone. Dykeman's trailers would be right behind me. Yet to the last, Whipple and his crowd were offering me the return trip end of my ticket with them; if I would come back and be good, even now, all would be forgiven. I sized up the situation briefly and took my plunge, shutting the door after me, glancing across the long room to see that Barbara Wallace's desk was deserted. Nobody followed me from the room I had just left. I walked quickly to the outer door.

Little Pete switched on his engine as I leaped into the car. My "Let her go!" wasn't needed to make him throw in his clutch, and give me a flying start straight ahead down the broad plank way of the Embarcadero. Looking back as we hit the belt-line tracks, I saw a small car with two men in it, shoot out from one of the wide doorways of the plant; but as we rounded the cliff-like side of Telegraph Hill, my view of them was cut off. Things had come for me thick and fast. I felt pretty well balled up. But the girl had used secrecy in appointing this interview; till I could see further into the thing, it was anyhow a safe bet to drop them.

"Pete," I said, "lose that car behind us. Only ten minutes to slip them and land me at Fisherman's Warf. Show me what-for."

He grinned. Between Montgomery and the bay, north of California Street, there are many narrow byways, crowded with the heavy traffic of hucksters and vegetable men, a section devoted to the commission business. Into its congestion Pete dove with a weasel instinct for finding the right holes to slip through, the alleys that might be navigated in safety; in less than the ten minutes I'd specified, we were free again on Columbus Avenue, pursuit lost, and headed back for the restaurant on the wharf.

"Boss," Little Pete was hoarse with the excitement he loved, as he laid the roadster alongside the Little Italy, "was it on the level, what you fed the lawyer guy? Ain't you wise to where Captain Gilbert is? I've saw him frequent since you've been gone."

"How many times is 'frequent,' Pete?" I asked. "And when did the last 'frequent' happen?"

"Twice," sulkily. I'd wounded his pride by not taking him seriously; but he added as I jumped down from the machine. "I druv him up on the hill, 'round the place where you an' him—an' her—went that day."

Pete didn't need to use Barbara Wallace's name. The way he salaamed to the pronoun was enough; the swath that girl cut evidently reached from the cradle to the grave, with this monkey grinning at one end, and me doddering along at the other.

I gave a moment to questioning Pete, found out all he knew, and went into the restaurant, wondering what under heaven Barbara Wallace would say to me or ask me.

The Little Italy restaurant is not so bad a place for luncheon. If one likes any eatables the western seas produce, I heartily recommend it. Where fish are unloaded from the smacks by the ton, fish are sure to be in evidence, but they are nice, fresh fish, and look good enough to eat. And the Little Italy is clean, with white oil-clothed tables and a view from its broad windows that down-town restaurants would double their rent to get.

Just now it was full of noisy patrons, foreigners, mostly; people too busy eating to notice whether I carried my head on my shoulders or under my arm.

In a far corner, Barbara Wallace's eyes were on me from the minute I came within her sight. She had ordered clams for two, mostly, I thought, to defend the privacy of our talk from the interruptions of a waiter, and I was hardly in my chair before she burst out,

"Where's Worth? Why wasn't he in that office to defend himself against what they're hinting?"

"I suppose," I said dryly, "because he wasn't given an invitation to attend. You ought to know why. You work for Dykeman."

"I work for Dykeman?" she repeated after me in a bewildered tone. "I'm bookkeeper in the Western Cereal Company's employ, if that's what you mean. You understood so from the first."

"You know I didn't," I reproached her hotly. "Do you think I'd have let you on the inside of this case if I'd known it was a pipe line direct to Dykeman?"

And on the instant I spoke there came to me a remembrance of her saying that Sunday morning as we pulled up before the St. Dunstan that she went past the place on the street car every day getting to her work at the Western Cereal Company. Sloppy of me not to have paid better attention; I knew vaguely that Dykeman was in one of the North Beach mills.

"Fifty-fifty, Barbara," I conceded. "I should have known—made it my business to learn. And Dykeman has questioned you—"

"He has not!" indignantly. "I don't suppose he knows Worth and I are acquainted." I could have smiled at that. There were detectives' reports in Dykeman's desk that recorded date, hour and duration of every meeting this girl had had with Worth and with myself. Besides, Cummings knew. It must have been through Cummings that she learned what was about to take place in Dykeman's private office. What had she told Cummings?

I was ready to blurt out the question, when she fumbled in her bag with little, shaking hands, drew out and passed to me unopened the envelope addressed to Worth, with my detailed report of the Skeels chase.

"I did my best to deliver it," she steadied her voice as she spoke. "He wasn't at the Palace. He wasn't at Santa Ysobel. He didn't communicate with me here."

My edifice of suspicion of Barbara Wallace crumbled. Cummings had not learned through her that I was unsuccessful in the south; nor had she spilled a word to him that she shouldn't, or they'd have had the dope on where Worth had found that suitcase, and thrown it at me quick.

"Barbara," I said, "will you accept my apologies?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled vaguely. "I don't know what you're apologizing for, but it doesn't matter. I hoped you would bring me news of Worth—of where he is."

"When did you see him last?"

"On the day of the funeral. I hardly got to speak to him."

Little Pete's news was slightly later. He'd taken Worth up to the Gold Nugget and dropped him there. Thursday, Worth was at the Nugget for more than an hour. On both occasions, Pete was told to slip the trailers, and did. That meant that Worth was working on the Clayte case—or thought he was. I told her of this.

"Yes—Oh, yes," she repeated listlessly. "But where is he now? And awful things—things like this meeting—coming up."

"What besides this meeting?"

"At Santa Ysobel."

"What? Things that have happened since the boy's gone? You couldn't get much idea of the lay of the land when you were down there Wednesday, could you?"

"Oh, but I could—I did," earnestly. "Of course it was a large funeral; it seemed to me I saw everybody I'd ever known. At a time like that, nothing would be said openly, but the drift was all in one direction. They couldn't understand Worth, and so nearly every one who spoke of him, picked at him, trying to understand him. Mrs. Thornhill's cook was already telling that Worth had quarreled with his father and demanded money. I shouldn't wonder if by now Santa Ysobel's set the exact hour of the quarrel."

"Me for down there as quick as I can," I muttered, and Barbara, facing me sympathetically, offered,

"I've a letter from Skeet Thornhill," she groped in her bag again, mumbling as women do when they're hunting for a thing, "It came this morning . . . Mrs. Thornhill's no better—worse, I judge . . . Oh, here it is," and she pulled out a couple of closely scribbled sheets. "The child writes a wild hand," she apologized, as she passed these over.

The flapper dashed into her letter with a sort of incoherent squeal. The carnival ball was only four days off. Everybody was already dead on his, her or its feet. The decorations they'd planned were enough to kill a horse—let alone getting up costumes. "As usual, everything seems to be going to the devil here," she went on; "Got a cannery girl elected festival queen this time. Ina's furious, of course. Moms had a letter from her that singed the envelope; but I sort of enjoy seeing the cannery district break in. They've got the money these days."

Nothing here to my purpose. Barbara reached forward and turned the sheet for me, and I saw Worth Gilbert's name half way down it.

"Doctor Bowman is an old hell-cat, and I hate him." Skeet made her points with a fine simplicity. "Since mother's sick, he comes here every day, though what he does but sit and shoot off his mouth and get her all worked up is more than I can see. Yesterday I was in the room when he was there, and he got to talking about Worth—the meanest, lowest-down, hinting talk you ever heard! Said Worth got a lot of money when his father died, and I flared up and said what of it? Did he think Mr. Gilbert ought to have left it to him? That hit him, because he and Mr. Gilbert used to be good friends, and he and Worth aren't. I sassed him, and he got so mad that just as he was leaving, he hollered at me that I better ask Worth Gilbert where he was at the hour his father was shot. Now, what do you know about that? That man is spreading stories. A doctor can set them going. He's making his messy old calls on people all day, and they, poor fish-hounds, believe everything he says. Though mother didn't. After he was gone, she just lay there in her bed and said over and over that it was a lie, a foolish, dangerous lie! Poor mumsie, she's so nervous that when the grocer's truck had a blow-out down in the drive, she nearly went into hysterics—cried and carried on, something about it's being 'the shot.' I suppose she meant the one when Mr. Gilbert killed himself. Wasn't that queer? Any loud noise of the sort sets her off that way. She lies and listens, and listens and mutters to herself. It scares me." She closed with, "Please don't break your promise to be here through this infernal Bloss. Fes."

"Good advice, that last," I said slowly, as I laid the letter on the table, keeping a hand on it. "You'll do that, won't you, Barbara?"

"I had intended to. I was given leave from this afternoon. But—well—I'd thought it over, and almost made up my mind to go back to my desk."

Barbara Wallace uncertain, halting between two courses of action! What did it mean?

"See here, Barbara; this isn't a time for Worth Gilbert's friends to slacken on him."

"I hadn't slackened," she said very low. And left it for me to remember that Worth apparently had.

"Then you're needed at Santa Ysobel," I urged.

"But you're going, aren't you, Mr. Boyne?"

"Yes. As soon as I can get off. That doesn't keep you from being needed. Worth's one of the most efficiently impossible young men I ever tried to handle. Maybe he's not any fuller of shocks than any other live wire, but he sure does manage to plant them where they'll do the most harm. Cummings, Dykeman—and this Dr. Bowman down there; active enemies."

"They can't hurt Worth Gilbert—all of them together!"

"Wait a minute. I'm going to Santa Ysobel to find the murderer of Thomas Gilbert. That means a stirring to the depths of that little town. This underneath-the-surface combustion will get poked into a flame—she's going to burst out, and somebody's going to get burned. We don't want that to be Worth, Barbara."

"No. But what can I do—what influence have I with him—" she was beginning, but I broke in on her.

"Barbara, you and I are going to find the real murderer, before the Cummings-Dykeman bunch discover a way into and out of that bolted study. Those people want to see Worth in jail."

There was a long pause while she faced me, the rich color failing a little in her cheeks.

"I see," speaking slowly, studying each word. "And as long as we didn't find out how to enter and leave the study, we have no way of knowing how hard or how easy it's going to be for them to find it out. We—" her voice still lower—"we can't tell if they already know it or not."

"Yes we can," I leaned forward to say. "The minute they know that—Worth Gilbert will be charged with murder."

I hit hard enough that time to bring blood, but she bled inwardly, sitting there staring at me, quite pale, finally faltering,

"Well—I can't stop to think of his having followed Ina Vandeman south—on her wedding trip—if he needs me—and I can help—I must—" she broke down completely, and I sat there feeling big-footed and blundering at this revelation of what it was that had put that clear, logical mind of hers off the track, left her confused, groping, just a girl, timid, distrustful of her own judgment where her heart was concerned.

"Was that it all the time?" I asked. "Well, take it from me, Worth's done nothing of the sort. He's been playing detective, not chasing off after some other man's bride."

Up came the color to her cheeks, she reached that mite of a hand across to shake on the bargain with,

"I'll go straight down this evening. You'll find me in Santa Ysobel when you come, Mr. Boyne."

"At the Thornhills'?" It might be handy to have her there; but she shook her head, looking a little self-conscious.

"I'm taking that spare room at Sarah Capehart's. Skeet wanted me, and I have an invitation from Laura Bowman; but if—well, seeing that this investigation is going to cover all that neighborhood, I thought I'd rather be with Sarah."

The level-headed little thing! Pete and I had the pleasure of taking her out to her home where she had her packing to attend to. On the way she spoke of an engagement with Cummings for the theater Saturday night.

"And instead, I suppose I shall be at the carnival ball. Shall I tell him that in my note, Mr. Boyne? Is it all right to let him know?"

"It's all right," I assented. "You can bet Cummings is due down there as soon as Worth shows up; and that must be soon, now."

"Yes," Barbara agreed. Her face clouded a little. "You noticed in Skeet's letter that they're expecting Ina to-morrow."

Poor child—she couldn't get away from it. I patted the hand I had taken to say good-by and assured her again,

"Worth Gilbert hasn't been in the south. I wonder at you, Barbara. You're so clear headed about everything else—don't you see that that would be impossible?"

Then I drove back to my office, to find lying on my desk a telegram from the young man, dated at Los Angeles, requesting me to meet him at Santa Ysobel the following evening!

CHAPTER XVII

CLEANSING FIRES

WEDNESDAY evening I pulled into a different Santa Ysobel: lanterns strung across between the buildings, bunting and branches of bloom everywhere, streets alive with people milling around, and cars piled high with decorative material, crowded with the decorators. The carnival of blossoms was only three days ahead.

At Bill Capehart's garage they told me Barbara was out somewhere with the crowd; and a few minutes later on Main Street, I met her in a Ford truck. Skeet Thornhill was at the wheel, adding to the general risk of life and limb on Santa Ysobel streets, carrying a half a dozen or more other young things tucked away behind. Both girls shouted at me; they were going somewhere for something and would see me later.

Getting down toward the Gilbert place, just beyond the corner, I flushed from the shadows of the pepper trees a bird I knew to be one of Dykeman's operatives. Watching his carefully careless progress on past the Gilbert lawn, then the Vandeman grounds, my eye was led to a pair who approached across the green from the direction of the bungalow. No mistaking the woman; even at this distance, height and the clean sweep of her walk, told me that this was the bride, Ina Vandeman. And the man strolling beside her—had he come with her from the house, or joined her on the cross-cut path?—could that be Worth Gilbert?

I sat in the roadster and gaped. The evening light—behind them, and dim enough at best—made their countenances fairly indistinguishable. At the gap in the hedge, they paused, and Mrs. Vandeman reached out, broke off a flower to fasten in his buttonhole, looking up into his face, talking quickly. Old stuff—but always good reliable old stuff. Then Worth saw me and hailed, "Hello, Jerry!" But he did not come to me, and I swung out of the machine to the sidewalk.

I heard the sobbing of the Ford truck; it went by, missing my runningboard by an inch, stopped at Vandeman's gate and Skeet discharged her cargo of clamor to stream across the sidewalk and up toward the bungalow. I saw Barbara, in the midst of the moving figures, suddenly stop, knew she had seen the two over there, and crossed to her, with a cheerful,

"He's here all right."

"Oh, yes," not looking toward the gap in the hedge, or at me. "He came on the same train with—with them."

Then some one from the porch yowled reproachfully for her to fetch those banners *pronto,* and with a little catching of breath, she ran on up the walk.

I turned back. Worth and Ina had moved on. Bronson Vandeman, well groomed, dressed as though he had just come in off the golf links, his English shoes and loud patterned stockings differentiating him from the crude outdoor man of the Coast, had joined them on the Gilbert lawn; his genial greeting to me let his bride get by with a mere bow, turning at once back to her house by the front walk. But rather to my annoyance, Vandeman came bounding up the steps after us. I judged Worth must have invited him.

Chung carried my suitcase upstairs, and lingered a minute in my room. I'll swear it wasn't merely to get the tip for which he thanked me, but with the idea of showing me in some recondite, Oriental fashion that he was glad I'd come. This interested me. The people who were glad to have me in Santa Ysobel at this time belonged on the clean side of my ledger. Then I went downstairs to find Vandeman still in the living room, sprawled at ease beside the window, looking round with a display of his fine teeth, reaching a hand to pull in the chair Worth set for me.

"Well, Jerry," that young man prompted, indicating by a careless gesture the smokers' tray on the table beside me, "there is time before dinner for the tale of your exploits. How's my friend Steve?"

I began to select a cigar, and said shortly,

"It's all in reports waiting for you at my office."

"Yes." Worth ignored my irritation. "Tell it. What'd you do down south?"

"Just back from the south yourself, aren't you?" I countered.

"Sure," airily. "But I wasn't there to butt in on your game. Did you find that Skeels was Clayte?"

I merely looked over the flame of my match at that small-town society man, smiling back at me with a show of polite interest.

"Go on," Worth interpreted. "Vandeman knows all about it. I tried to sell him a few shares of stock in the suitcase, so he'll take an interest in the game; but he's too much the tight-wad to buy."

"Oh, no," deprecated Vandeman. "Just no gambler; hate to take a chance." He ran his fingers through his hair, tossing it up with a gesture I had noticed when he came back from the dance at Tait's.

"All right—apology accepted," Worth nodded. "Anyway, you didn't. Well, Jerry?"

Vandeman waited a moment with natural curiosity, then, as I still said nothing, giving my attention to my smoke, moved reluctantly to rise, saying,

"That means I'd better chase along and let you two talk business."

"No. Sit tight," from Worth.

I was mad clear through, and disturbed and apprehensive, too. I managed a brief, dry statement of the outcome in the south. Worth hailed it with,

"Skeels lurks in the jungle! Life still holds a grain of interest."

"Why the devil couldn't you keep me advised of your movements?" I demanded.

"Dykeman's hounds," he grinned. "Had them guessing. They'd have picked me up if I'd gone to your office."

"You could have written or wired. They've picked you up anyway," I grunted. "One's on the job now. Saw him as I came in."

"Eh? What's that?" cried Vandeman, a man snooping in the shrubbery outside getting more attention from him than one dodging pursuit three hundred miles away. "What do you mean, hounds?" and when he had heard the explanation of Dykeman's trailers, "I call that intolerable!"

"Oh, I don't know." Worth reached over my shoulder for a cigarette. "Lose 'em whenever I like."

I wasn't so certain. There were men in my employ he couldn't shake. Perhaps those reports in Dykeman's desk might have offered some surprises to this cock-sure lad. My exasperation at Worth mounted as I listened to Vandeman talking.

"Those bank people should do one thing or another," he gave his opinion. "Just because you got gay with them and handed them their payment in the suitcase it left in, they've no right to have you watched like a criminal. In a small town like this, such a thing will ruin a man's standing."

"If he has any standing," Worth laughed.

"See here," Vandeman's smile was persuasive. "Don't let what I said out in front embitter you."

"I'll try not to."

"Mr. Boyne"—Vandeman missed the sarcasm—"when I got back to this town to-day, what do you suppose I found? The story going around that a quarrel with Worth, over money, drove his father to take his own life."

"That's my business here," I nodded. And when he looked his surprise, "To stop such stories."

He stared at me, frankly puzzled for a moment, then said,

"Well, of course you know, and I know, that they're scurrilous lies; but just how will you stop them?"

I had intended my remark to stand as it was; but Worth filled in the pause after Vandeman's question with,

"Jerry's here to get the truth of my father's murder, Bronse."

"Murder?" The mere naked word seemed to shock Vandeman. His sort clothe and pad everything—even their speech. "I didn't know any one entertained the idea your father was murdered. He couldn't have been—not the way it happened."

"Nevertheless we think he was."

"Oh, but Boyne—start a thing like that, and think of the talk it'll make! They'll commence at once saying that there was nobody but Worth to profit by his father's death."

"Don't worry, Mr. Vandeman." He made me hot. "We know where to dig up the motive for the crime."

"You mean the diaries?" Worth's voice sounded unbelievably from beside me. "Nothing doing there, Jerry. I've burned them."

I sat and choked down the swears. Yet, looking back on it, I saw plainly that Jerry Boyne was the man who deserved kicking. I ought never to have left them with him.

"You read them and burned them?" said Vandeman.

"Burned them without reading," Worth's impatient tones corrected.

"Without reading!" the other echoed, startled. Then, after a long pause, "Oh—I say—pardon me, but—but ought that to have been done? Surely not. Worth—if you'd read your father's diaries for the past few years—I don't believe you'd have a doubt that he committed suicide—not a doubt."

Worth sat there mute. Myself, I was rather curious as to what Vandeman would say; I had read much in those diaries. But when it came, it was the same old line of talk one hears when there's a suicide: Gilbert was a lonely man; his life hadn't been happy; he cut himself off from people too much. Vandeman said that of late he believed he was pretty nearly the only intimate the dead man had. This last gave him an interest in my eyes. I broke in on his generalities to ask him bluntly why he was so certain the death was suicide.

"Mr. Gilbert was breaking up; had been for two years or more. Worth's been away; he's not seen it; but I can tell you, Boyne, his father's mind was affected."

Worth let that pass, though I could see he wasn't convinced by Vandeman's sentimentalities, any more than I was. After the man had gone, I turned on Worth sharply, with,

"Why the devil did you tell that pink-tea proposition about your dealings with the Van Ness Avenue bank?"

"Safety valve, I guess. I get up too heavy a load of steam, and it's easy to blow it off to Vandeman. Told him most of it in the smoker, coming up. You'll talk about anything in a smoker."

"Oh, will you?" I said in exasperation. "And you'll burn anything, I suppose, that a match'll set fire to?"

"Go easy, Jerry Boyne." His chin dropped to his chest, he sat glowering out through the window. "Cleansing fires for that sort of garbage," he said finally. "I burned them on the day of his funeral."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TORN PAGE

MY coming had thrown dinner late; we were barely through with the meal and back once more in the living room when the latch of the French window rattled, the window itself was pushed open, and a high imperious voice proclaimed,

"The Princess of China, calling on Mr. Worth Gilbert."

There stood Ina Vandeman in the gorgeously embroidered robes of a high caste Chinese lady, her fair hair covered by a sleek black wig that struck out something odd, almost ominous, in the coloring of her skin, the very planes of her features. Outside, along the porch, sounded the patter of many feet; Skeet wriggled through the narrow frame under her tall sister's arm, came scooting into the room to turn and gaze back at her.

"Doesn't she look the vamp?"

"Skeet!" Ina had sailed in by this time, and Ernestine followed more soberly. "You've been told not to say that."

"I think," the other twin backed her up virtuously, "with poor mother sick and all, you might respect her wishes. You know what she said about calling Ina a vamp." And Skeet drawled innocently,

"That it hit too near the truth to be funny—wasn't that it?"

Through the open window had followed a half dozen more of the Blossom Festival crowd, Barbara and Bronson Vandeman among them. Ina paid no attention to any one, standing there, her height increased by the long, straight lines of the costume, her bisque doll features given a strange, pallid dignity by the raw magnificence of its crusted purple and crimson and green and gold embroidery and the dead black wig.

"Isn't it an exquisite thing, Worth?" displaying herself before him. "Bronse has a complete Mandarin costume; we lead the grand march as the emperor and empress of Mongolia. Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"First rate." Worth spoke in his usual unexcited fashion, and it was difficult to say whether he meant the oriental idea or the appearance of the girl who stood before him. She came close and offered the cuff of one of her sleeves to show him the embroidery, lifting a delicate chin to display the jade buttons at the neck.

Barbara over on the other side of the room refused to meet my eye. Mrs. Bowman, a big fur piece pulled up around her throat, shivered. I met half a dozen Santa Ysobel people whose names I've forgotten. I could see that Bronson Vandeman socially took the lead here, that everybody looked to him. The room was a babel of talk, when a few minutes later the doorbell rang in orthodox fashion, and Chung ushered Cummings in upon the general confusion. Some of the bunch knew and spoke to him; others didn't and had to be presented; it took the first of his time and attention. He only got a chance for one swipe at me, a low-toned, sarcastic, "Made a mistake to duck me, Boyne."

I didn't think it worth while to answer that. Presently I saw him standing with Barbara. He was evidently effecting a switch of his theater engagement to the ball, for I heard Skeet's,

"Mr. Cummings wants a ticket! He'll need two! Ten dollars, Mr. Cummings—five apiece."

"No, no—Skeet," Barbara laughed embarrassedly. "Mr. Cummings was just joking. He'll not be here Saturday night."

"I'll come back for it," hand in pocket.

"It's a masquerade—" Barbara hesitated.

"Bring my costume with me from San Francisco."

"I'm not sure—" again Barbara hesitated; Skeet cut in on her,

"Why, Barbie Wallace! It's what you came to Santa Ysobel for—the Bloss. Fes. ball. And to think of your getting a perfectly good man, right at the last minute this way, and not having to tag on to Bronse and Ina or something like that! I think you're the lucky girl," and she clutched Cummings' offered payment to stow it with other funds she had collected.

At last they got themselves out of the room and left us alone with Cummings. He had carried through his little deal with Barbara as though it meant considerable to him, but I knew that his errand with Worth was serious, and put in quickly,

"I intended to write or phone you to-morrow, Cummings."

"Well," the lawyer worked his mouth a bit under that bristly mustache and looked at Worth, "it might have saved you some embarrassment if you'd been warned of my errand here to-night—earlier, that is.

I suppose Captain Gilbert has told you that I phoned him, when I failed to connect with you, that I was coming here—and what I was coming for?"

"I didn't tell Jerry," Worth picked up a cigarette. "Couldn't very well tell him what you were coming for. Don't know myself."

The words were blunt; really I think there was no intention to offend, only the simple statement of a fact; but I could see Cummings beginning to simmer, as he inquired,

"Does that mean you didn't understand my words on the phone, or that you understood them and couldn't make out what I meant by them?"

"Little of both," allowed Worth. Cummings stepped close to him and let him have it direct:

"I'm here to-night, Captain Gilbert, as executor of your father's estate. I have filed the will to-day. I might have done so earlier, but when I inventoried this place (you remember, the day before the funeral—you were here at the time) I failed to locate a considerable portion of your father's estate."

"You failed to locate? All the estate's here; this house, the down-town properties. What do you mean, failed to locate?"

"I was not alluding to realty," said Cummings. "It's my duty to locate and report to the court the present whereabouts of seventy-five thousand dollars worth of stock in the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank. Can you declare to me as executor, where it is? And, if any other person than your father placed it in its present whereabouts, are you ready to declare to me how and when it came into that person's possession?"

"Quite a lot of words, Cummings; but it doesn't mean anything," Worth said casually. "You know where that bank stock is and who put it there."

"Officially, I do not know. Officially, I demand to be told."

"Unofficially, answer it for yourself." Worth turned his back on the lawyer to get a match from the mantel.

"Very well. My answer is that I intend to find out how and when that bank stock which formed a part of your payment to the Van Ness Avenue bank disappeared from this house."

I admit I was scared. Here was the first gun of the coming battle; and I was sure this enemy, who stood now looking through half closed eyes at the lad's back, would have poisoned gas among his weapons. He had emphasized the *"when."* He believed that the stories of Worth's night visit to his father were true; that the implied denial by Barbara and myself in my office, was false; that Worth had either received the stock from his father that Saturday night or taken it unlawfully. I was sure that it was the stock certificates which I had seen Worth take from the safe-compartment of the sideboard in the small hours of Monday morning; a breach of legal form which it would be possible for a friendly executor to pass over.

"Cummings, Worth inherits everything under his father's will; what's the difference about a small irregularity in taking possession? He—"

"Never explain, Jerry," Worth shut me up. "Your friends don't need it, and your enemies won't believe it."

Cummings had stood where he was since the first of the interview. His face went strangely livid. There was more in this than a legal fight.

"Yes, Boyne's a fool to try to help your case with explanations, Gilbert," he choked out. "I'll see that both of you get a chance to answer questions elsewhere —under oath. Good evening." He turned and left.

He had the best of it all around. I endeavored for some time to get before Worth the dangers of his high-handed defiance of law, order, probate judges, and the court's officers, in the person of Allen G. Cummings, attorney and his father's executor. He listened, yawned—and suggested that it must be nearly bedtime. I gave it up, and we went—I, at least, with a sense of danger ahead upon me—to our rooms.

Along in the middle of the night I waked to the knowledge that a casement window was pounding somewhere in the house. For a while I lay and listened in that helpless, exaggerated resentment one feels at such a time. I'd drop off, get nearly to sleep, only to be jerked broad awake again by the thudding. Listening carefully I decided that the bothersome window was in Worth's room, and finally I got up sense and spunk enough to roll out of bed, stick my feet into slippers, and sneak over with the intention of locking it.

The room was dimly lighted from the street lamps, far away as they were; I made my way across it. Worth's deep, regular breathing was quite undisturbed. I had trouble with the catch, went and felt over the bureau and found his flashlight, fixed the window by its help, and returning it, remembering how near I came to knocking it off the bureau top, thought to put it in a drawer which stood half open.

As I aimed it downward, its circle of illumination showed something projecting a corner from beneath the swirl of ties and sheaf of collars—a book—a red morocco-bound book. Mechanically I nudged the stuff away with the torch itself. What lay there turned me cold. It was the 1920 diary!

My fingers relaxed; the flashlight fell with a thump, as I let out an exclamation of dismay. A sleepy voice inquired from the bed,

"Hi, you Jerry! What you up to in here?"

For answer, I dragged out the book, went over to the bed, and switched on the reading lamp there. Worth scowled in the glare, and flung his arms up back of his head for a pillow to raise it a bit.

"Yeah," blinking amiably at the volume. "Meant to tell you. Found it to-day when I was down in the repair pit at the garage. It had been stuck in the drainpipe there."

"And I suppose," I said savagely, "that if I hadn't come onto it now, you'd have burned this, too."

"Don't get sore, Jerry," he said. "I saved it," and he yawned.

I had an uncontrollable impulse to have a look at that last entry, which would record the bitter final quarrel between this boy and his father. No difficulty about finding the spot; as I raised the book in my hands it fell open of itself at the place. I looked and what I saw choked me—got cross-wise in my throat for a moment so no words could come out. I stuck the book under his nose, and held it there till I could whisper.

"Worth, did you do this?"

The last written page was numbered 49; on it was recorded the date, March sixth; the weather, cloudy, clearing late in the afternoon; the fact that the sun had set red in a cloudless sky; and it ended abruptly in the middle of a phrase. The leaf that carried page 50 had been torn out; not cut away carefully as were those leaves in the earlier book, but ripped loose, grabbed with clutching fingers that scarred and twisted the leaf below!

He shoved my hand away and stared at me. For a moment I thought everything was over. Certainly I could not be a very appealing sight, standing there sweating with fear, my hair all stuck up on my head where I'd clawed it, shivering in my nightclothes more from miserable nervousness than from cold; but somehow those eyes of his softened; he gave me one of the looks that people who care for Worth will go far to get, and said quietly,

"You see what you're doing? I told you I didn't steal the book, so that clears me in your mind of being the murderer. Now you're after me about this torn-out page. If I'd torn it out and stolen it—you and I would know what it would mean."

"But, boy—," I began, when he suffered a change of heart.

"Get out of here! Take that damn book and leave."

He heaved himself over in the bed, hunching the covers about his ears, turning his back on me. As I crept away, I heard him finish in a sort of mutter—as though to himself—

"I'm sorry for you, Jerry Boyne."

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE HILL-TOP

MORNING dawned on the good ship Jerry Boyne not so dismasted and rudderless as you might have thought. I'd carried that 1920 diary to my room and, before I slept, read the whole of it. This was the last word we had from the dead man; here if anywhere would be found support for the suggestions of a weakening mind and suicide.

Nothing of that sort here; on the contrary, Thomas Gilbert was very much his clear-headed, unpleasant, tyrannical self to the last stroke of the pen. But I came on something to build up a case against Eddie Hughes, the chauffeur.

I didn't get much sleep. As soon as I heard Chung moving around, I went down, had him give me a cup of coffee, then stationed him on the back porch, and walked to the study, shut myself in, and discharged my heavy police revolver into a corner of the fireplace; then with the front door open, fired again.

"How many shots?" I called to Chung.

"One time shoot."

Worth's head poked from his upstair's window as he shouted,

"What's the excitement down there?"

"Trying my gun. How many times did I fire?"

"Once, you crazy Indian!" and the question of sound-proof walls was settled. Nobody heard the shot that killed Gilbert twenty feet away from the study if the door was closed. Mrs. Thornhill's ravings, as described in Skeet's letter to Barbara, were merely delirium.

I walked out around the driveway to the early morning streets of Santa Ysobel. The little town looked as peaceful and innocent as a pan of milk. In an hour or so, its ways would be full of people rushing about getting ready for the carnival, a curious contrast to my own business, sinister, tragic. It seemed to me that two currents moved almost as one, the hidden, dark part under—for there must be those in the town who knew the crime was murder; the murderer himself must still be here—and the foam of noisy gayety and blossoms riding atop. A Blossom Festival; the boyhood of the year; and I was in the midst of it, hunting a murderer!

An hour later I talked to Barbara in the stuffy little front room at Capehart's, brow-beaten by the noise of Sarah getting breakfast on the other side of the thin board partition; more disconcerted by the girl's manner of receiving the information of how I had found the 1920 diary hidden in Worth's bureau drawer. There was a swift, very personal anger at me. I had to clear myself instantly and thoroughly of any suspicion of believing for a moment that Worth himself had stolen or mutilated the book, protesting,

"I don't—I don't! Listen, Barbara—be reasonable!"

"That means 'Barbara, be scared!' And I won't. When they're scared, people make mistakes."

"You might see differently if you'd been there last night when Cummings made his charge against Worth.

That seventy two thousand dollars Worth carried up to the city Monday morning, he had taken from his father's safe the night before."

For a minute she just looked at me, and not even Worth Gilbert's dare-devil eyes ever held a more inclusively defiant light than those big, soft, dark ones of hers.

"Well—wasn't it his?"

"All right," I said shortly. "I'm not here to talk of Worth's financial methods; they're scheduled to get him into trouble; but let that pass. Look through this book and you'll see who it is I'm after."

She had already opened the volume, and began to glance along the pages. She made a motion for me to wait. I leaned back in my chair, and it was only a few moments later that she looked up to say,

"Don't make the arrest, Mr. Boyne. You have nothing here against Eddie—for murder."

Because I doubted myself, I began to scold, winding up,

"All the same, if that gink hasn't jumped town, I'll arrest him."

"It would be a good deal more logical to arrest him if he had jumped the town," Barbara reminded me. "If you really want to see him, Mr. Boyne, you'll find him at the garage around on the highway. He's working for Bill."

That was a set-back. A fleeing Eddie Hughes might have been hopeful; an Eddie Hughes who gave his employer back-talk, got himself fired, and then settled down within hand-reach, was not so good a bet. Barbara saw how it hit me, and offered a suggestion.

"Mr. Boyne, Worth and I are taking a hike out to San Leandro canyon this afternoon to get ferns for the decorating committee. Suppose you come along —anyhow, a part of the way—and have a quiet talk, all alone with us. Don't do anything until you have consulted Worth."

"All right—I'll go you," I assented, and half past two saw the three of us, Worth in corduroys and puttees, Barbara with high boots and short, dust-brown skirt, tramping out past the homes of people toward the open country. At the Vandeman place Skeet's truck was out in front, piled with folding chairs, frames, light lumber, and a lot of decorative stuff. The tall Chinaman came from the house with another load.

"You Barbie Wallace!" the flapper howled. "Aren't you ashamed to be walking off with Worth and Mr. Boyne both, and good men scarce as hen's teeth in Santa Ysobel to-day!"

"I'm not walking off with them—they're walking off with me," Barbara laughed at her.

"Shameless one!" Skeet drawled. "I see you let Mr. Cummings have a day off—aren't you the kind little boss to 'em!"

I just raised my brows at Barbara, and she explained a bit hastily,

"Skeet thinks she has to be silly over the fact that Mr. Cummings has gone up to town, I suppose." She added with fine indifference, "He'll be back in the morning."

"You bet he'll be back in the morning," Worth assured the world.

"Now what does he mean by that, Mr. Boyne?"

"He means Cummings is out after him."

"I don't," Worth contradicted me personally. "I mean he's after Bobs. She knows it. Look at her."

She glanced up at me from under her hat-brim, all the stars out in those shadowy pools that were her eyes. The walk had brought sumptuous color to her cheeks, where the two extra deep dimples began to show.

"You both may think," she began with a sobriety that belied the dimples and shining eyes, "looking on from the outside, that Mr. Cummings has an idea of, as Skeet would say, 'rushing' me; but when we're alone together, about all he talks of is Worth."

"Bad sign," Worth flung over a shoulder that he pushed a little in advance of us. "Takes the old fellows that way. Their notion of falling for a girl is to fight all the other Johnnies in sight. Guess you've got him going, Bobs."

I walked along, chewing over the matter. She'd estimated Cummings fairly, as she did most things that she turned that clear mind of hers on; but her lack of vanity kept her from realizing, as I did, that he was in the way to become a dangerous personal enemy to Worth. His self-interest, she thought, would eventually swing him to Worth's side. She didn't as yet perceive that a motive more powerful than self-interest had hold of him now.

"Why, Mr. Boyne," she answered as though I'd been speaking my thoughts aloud, "I've known Mr. Cummings for years and years. He never—"

"You said a mouthful there, Bobs." Worth halted, grinning, to interrupt her. "He never—none whatever. But he has now."

"He hasn't."

"Leave it to Jerry. Jerry saw him that first night in at Tait's; then afterward, in the office."

"Oh, come on!" Barbara started ahead impatiently. "What difference would it make."

They went on ahead of me, scrapping briskly, as a boy and girl do who have grown up together. I stumped along after and reflected on the folly of mankind in general, and that of Allen G. Cummings in particular. That careful, mature bachelor had seen this lustrous young creature blossom to her present perfection; he'd no doubt offered her safe and sane attention, when she came to live in San Francisco where they had friends in common. But it had needed Worth Gilbert's appearance on the scene to wake him up to his own real feeling. Forty-five on the chase of nimble sweet and twenty; Cummings was in for sore feet and humiliating tumbles—and we were in for the worst he could do to us. I sighed. Worth had more than one way of making enemies, it seemed.

At last we came in sight of the country club upon its rise of ground overlooking the golf links. The low, brown clubhouse, built bungalow fashion, with a long front gallery and gravel sweep, was swarming with people—the decorators. Motors came and went. The grounds were being strung with paper lanterns. We skirted these, and the links itself where there were two or three players, obstinate, defiant old men who would have their game in spite of forty blossom festivals—climbed a fence, and crossed the grass up to the crest of a little round hill, halting there for the view. It wasn't high, but standing free as it did, it commanded pretty nearly the entire Santa Ysobel district. Massed acres of pink and white, the great orchards ran one into the other without break for miles. The lanes between the trunks, diamonded like a harlequin's robe in mathematical primness, were newly turned furrows of rich, black soil, against which the gray or, sometimes, whitewashed trunks of apricot, peach and plum trees gave contrast. Then the cap of glorious blossoms, meeting overhead in the older orchards, with a warm blue sky above and puffs of clouds that matched the pure white of the plum trees' bloom.

The spot suited me well; we had left the town behind us; here neither Dykeman's spotter nor any one he hired to help him could get within listening distance. I dropped down on a bank; Worth and Barbara disposed themselves, he sprawling his length, she sitting cross-legged, just below him.

It wasn't easy to make a beginning. I knew it wouldn't do me any particular good with Worth to dwell on his danger. But I finally managed to lay fairly before them my case against Eddie Hughes, and I must say that, as I told it, it sounded pretty strong.

I didn't want to put too much stress on having found my evidence in the diaries; I knew Worth was as obstinate as a mule, and having said that he would not stand for any one being prosecuted on their evidence, he'd stick to it till the skies fell. I called on my memory of those pages, now unfortunately ashes and not get-atable, and explained that Worth's father hired Hughes directly after a jail-break at San Jose had roused the whole country. Three of the four escapes were rounded up in the course of a few days, but the fourth—known to us as Eddie Hughes—was safe in Thomas Gilbert's garage, working there as chauffeur, having been employed without recommendation on the strength of what he could do.

"And the low wages he was willing to take," Worth put in drily. "Old stuff, Jerry. I wasn't sure till you spilled it just now that my father was wise to it. But I knew. What you getting at?"

"Just this. When I talked to Hughes that first night I came down here with you, while we all supposed the death a suicide, he couldn't keep his resentment against your father, his hatred of him, from boiling over every time he was mentioned."

"Get on," said Worth wearily. "Father hired a jail-bird that came cheap. Probably put it to himself that he was giving the man a chance to go straight."

I glanced up. This was just about what I remembered Thomas Gilbert to have said in the entry that told of the hiring of Eddie. Worth nodded grimly at my startled face.

"Eddie's gone straight since then," he filled in. "That is, he's kept out of jail, which is going straight for Eddie. He'd certainly hate the man who held him as he's been held for five years. Not motive enough for murder though."

"There's more. The 1920 diary you gave me last night tells when and why the extra bolts were put on the study doors. Your father had been missing liquor and cigars and believed Hughes was taking them."

"Pilfering!" with an expression of distaste. "That doesn't—"

"Hold on!" I stopped him. "On February twelfth your father left money, marked coin and paper money, as if by accident, on the top of the liquor cabinet; not exposed, but dropped in under the edge of the big ash tray so it might look as though it were forgotten—in a sense, lost there."

"How much?" came the quick question.

"Fifty one dollars." He looked around at me.

"Just one dollar above the limit of petty larceny; a hundred cents added to put it in the felony class that meant state's prison. So he could have sent Eddie to the pen,—eh? I guess you've got a motive there, Boyne."

"Well—er—" I squirmed over my statement, blurting out finally. "Hughes didn't take the money."

"Knew it was a trap," Worth's laugh was bitter. "And hated the man who cold-bloodedly set it to catch him. If he didn't take it, don't you think he counted it?"

"Worth," I said sharply. "Your father put those bolts on—and continued to find that he was being robbed. He was mad about it. Any man would be. Say what you will, no one likes to find that persons in his employ are stealing from him. The aggravating thing was that he couldn't bring it home to Hughes, though he was sure of the fact."

"So he went back to what he had known of Eddie when he hired him? After profiting by it for five years, he was going to rake that up?"

"He was,"—a bit nettled—"and well within his rights to do so. Three weeks before he was shot, he wrote that he'd started the inquiry. There was no further mention of the matter in the book as it stands, but don't you see that the result of the inquiry must have been on that torn-out last page? Eddie's Saturday night alibi won't hold water. His cannery girl, of course, will swear he was with her; but there's no corroborating testimony. No one saw them together from nine till twelve."

Dead silence dropped on us, with the white clouds standing like witnesses in the blue above, the wind bringing now and again on its scented wings little faint echoes of the noise down at the clubhouse.

"What more do you want?" Both young faces were set against me, cold and hostile. "Here was motive, opportunity, a suspect capable of the deed. My theory is that Mr. Gilbert came in on Hughes, caught him in the act of stealing from the cabinet. Hughes jumped for the pistol over the fireplace, got it, fired the fatal shot, and placed the dead man's fingers about the butt of the gun. Then he picked up the diary lying on the table, tore out the leaf about himself, and poked the rest of the book down the drain pipe."

"And the shot?" Worth resisted me. "Why didn't the shot bring Chung on the run?"

"Because he couldn't hear it. Nobody'd hear it ten paces away. That's what I was trying out this morning. You told me I'd fired once. Well, I fired twice; once with the door shut, and neither you nor Chung heard it; afterward, with the door open—the report you registered."

"The blotter—and it had been used on that last page—showed no words to strengthen this theory of yours," said Barbara as confidently as though the little blue square had been clear print, instead of broken blurring. Perhaps it was clear to her. I was glad I'd given it a thorough reëxamination the night before.

"I think it does," I struggled against the tide, manfully, buoying myself up with the tracing of the blotter. "Here's the word 'demanded,' reasonably connected with the affair. The letters 'ller' may be the last end of 'caller,' or possibly 'fuller'; I noticed Gilbert spoke in a former entry of the bottle in the cabinet and Hughes snitching from it, and used the word 'fuller.' Here's the word 'Avenue,' complete, and Lizzie Watkins, Hughes' girl, lives on Myrtle Avenue."

The silence after that was fairly derisive. Worth broke it with an impatient,

"And the fact of the bolted doors throws all that stuff out."

"Well," I grunted, "Barbara deduced the slipping of some bolts to please you once—why can't she again?"

"Mr. Boyne," the girl spoke quickly, "it wouldn't help you a bit to be assured that Eddie Hughes could enter the study and leave it bolted behind him when he went out—help you to the truth, I mean. These facts you've gathered are all wabbly; they'll never in the world fit in trim and true. They're hardly facts at all. They're partial facts."

"Wouldn't help me?" I ejaculated. "It would cinch a case against him. We've got to have some one in jail, and that shortly. We're forced to."

"Forced?" Worth had sat up a little and reached far forward for a stone that lay among the weeds down there. He spoke to me sidewise with a challenging flicker of the eye. Barbara kept her lips tight shut.

"I need a prisoner," trying to correct my error; then burst out, "My Lord, children! An arrest isn't going to hurt a man like Hughes,—even if he proves to be innocent. It's an old story to him. Barbara, you said yourself that the man who stole the 1920 diary was the murderer."

"But I didn't say Eddie Hughes stole it." Her tone was significant, and it checked me. I couldn't remember what the deuce she had said that night. There recurred to me her mimicry of a woman's voice —Laura Bowman's as I believed—to determine through Chung who Thomas Gilbert's feminine visitor had been. Should that clue have been followed up before I moved on Eddie Hughes? Even as I got to this point, I heard Worth, punctuating his remarks with the whang of his rock on the bit of twig he was pounding to pieces,

"Boyne, I won't stand for any arrest being made except in all sincerity—the person you honestly believe to be the criminal."

"Does that mean you forbid me, in so many words, to proceed against Hughes on what I've got?"

"It does," Worth said. "You're not convinced yourself. Leave it alone."

"'Nough said!" I jumped to my feet. If he wouldn't let me lay hands on Hughes—there was nothing to do but go after the next one. "You two run along. Get your ferns. There's a man at the club here I have to see."

Barbara was afoot instantly; Worth lay looking at her for a moment, then heaved himself up, shook his shoulders, and stood beside her.

"Race you to the foot of the hill," she flashed up at him.

"You're on," he chuckled. "I'll give you a running start—to the tree down there—and beat you."

They were off. She ran like a deer. Worth got away as though he was in earnest. He caught her up just at the finish; I couldn't see which won; but they walked a few rods hand in hand.

Something swelled in my throat as I watched them away: life's springtime—and the year's; boy and girl running, like kids that had never known a fear or a mortal burden, over an earth greener than any other, because its time of verdure is brief, dreaming already of the golden-tan of California midsummer, under boughs where tree blooms made all the air sweet.

For sake of the boy and the girl who didn't know enough to take care of their own happiness, I wheeled and galloped in the direction of the country club.

There is an institution known—and respected—in police circles as the Holy Scare. I was determined to make use of it. I'd throw a holy scare into a man I knew, and see what came out.

CHAPTER XX

AT THE COUNTRY CLUB

THE country club, when I walked up its lawn, was noisy with the hammering and jawing of its decoration committee. Out in the glass belvedere, like superior goods on display, taking it easy while every one else worked, I saw a group of young matrons of the smart set, Ina Vandeman among them, drinking tea. The open play she was making at Worth troubled me a little. He was the silent kind that keeps you guessing. She'd landed him once; what was to hinder her being successful with the same tactics—whatever they'd been—a second time?

Then I saw Edwards' car was still out in the big, crescent driveway, showing by the drift of twigs and petals on its running board that it had been used to bring in tree blooms from his ranch; the man himself crossed the veranda, and I hailed,

"Any place inside where you and I could have a private word together?"

"I—I think so, Boyne," he hesitated. "Come on back here.

He led me straight across the big assembly room which was being trimmed for the ball. From the top of a stepladder, Skeet Thornhill yelled to us,

"Where you two going? Come back here, and get on the job."

She had a dozen noisy assistants. I waved at her from the further door as we ducked. Strange that honest, sound little thing should be own sister to the doll-faced vamp out there in the showcase.

Edwards made for a little writing room at the end of a corridor. I followed his long, nervous stride. If the man had been goaded to the shooting of Thomas Gilbert, it would have been an act of passion, and by passion he would betray himself. When I had him alone, the door shut, I went to it, told him we knew the death was murder, not suicide, and that the crime had been committed early Saturday night. Before I could connect him with it, he broke in on me,

"Is Worth suspected?"

"Not by me," I said. "And by God, not by you, Edwards! You know better than that."

I held his eye, but read nothing beyond what might have been the flare of quick anger for the boy's sake.

"Who then?" he said. "Who's dared to lisp a word like that? That hound Cummings—chasing around Santa Ysobel with Bowman—is that where it comes from? I told Worth the fellow was knifing him in the back." He began to stride up and down the room. "The boy's got other friends—that'll go their length for him. I'm with him till hell freezes over. You can count on me—"

"Exactly what I wanted to find out," I cut in, so significantly that he whirled at the end of his beat and stared.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you are the one man who could clear Worth Gilbert of all suspicion."

"What do you know?"

The big voice had come down to a mere whisper.

Plenty of passion now—a passion of terror. I spoke quickly.

"We know you were in the study that night, with a companion," and I piled out the worst of his affair, as I'd read it in the diaries, winding up,

"Plain what brought you there. Quarrel? Motive? Don't need to look any further."

Before I was done Jim Edwards had groped over to a chair and slumped into it. A queer, toneless voice asked,

"Worth sent you to me—a detective—with this?"

"No," I said. "I'm acting on my own."

"And against his will," it came back instantly.

"What of it?" I demanded. "Are you the coward to take advantage of his sense of honor?—to let his generosity cost him his life?"

"His life." That landed. Watching, I saw the struggle that tore him. He jumped up and started toward me; I hadn't much doubt that I was now going to hear a plea for mercy—a confession, of sorts—as he stopped, dropped his head, and stood scowling at the floor.

"Talk," I said. "Spill it. Now's your time."

He raised his eyes to mine and spoke suddenly.

"Boyne—I have nothing to say."

"And Worth Gilbert can hang and be damned to him—is that it?" I took another step toward him. "No, Edwards, that 'nothing to say' stuff won't go in a court of law. It won't get you anywhere."

"They'll never in the world—try Worth for—that killing."

"I'm expecting his arrest any hour."

"A trial! Those cursed diaries of Tom's brought into court—My God! I believe if I'd known he'd written things like that, I could have killed him for it!"

I stared. He had forgotten me. But at this speech I mentally dropped him for the moment, and fastened my suspicions on the woman who went with him to the study.

"All right," I said brutally. "You didn't kill Thomas Gilbert. But you took Mrs. Bowman to the study that night to have it out with him, and get six pages from the 1916 book. She got 'em—and you know what she had to do to get 'em."

"Hold on, Boyne!" he said sternly. "Don't you talk like that to me."

"Well," I said, "Mrs. Bowman was there—after those diary leaves. I heard Barbara Wallace imitate her voice—and Chung recognized the imitation. You know—that night at the study—the first night."

He took a bewildered moment or two for thought, then broke out,

"It wasn't Laura's voice Barbara imitated. Did she say so?"

"No, but she imitated the voice of a woman who came weeping to get those pages from the diary; and who else would that be? Who else would want them?"

"You're off the track, Boyne," he drew a great, shuddering sigh of relief. "Tom was always playing the tyrant to those about him; no doubt some woman did come crying for that stuff—but it wasn't Laura."

"By Heaven!" I exclaimed as I looked at him. "You know who it was! You recognized the voice that night—but the woman isn't one you're interested in."

"I'm interested in all women, so far as their getting a decent show in the world is concerned," he maintained sturdily. "I'd go as far as any man to defend the good name of a woman—whether I thought much of her or not."

"This other woman," I argued, not any too keen on such a job myself, "hasn't she got some man to speak for her?"

Edwards looked at me innocently.

"She didn't have, then—" he began, and I finished for him,

"But she has now. I've got it!" As I jumped up and hurried to the door, his eyes followed me in wonder. There I turned with, "Stay right where you are. I'll be back in a minute," ducked out into the hall and signaled a passing messenger, then stepped quickly back into the writing room and said, "I've sent for Bronson Vandeman."

He settled deeper in his chair with,

"I'll stay and see it out. If you get anything from Vandeman, I miss my guess."

CHAPTER XXI

A MATTER OF TASTE

UPON our few moments of strained waiting, Vandeman breezed in, full of apologies for his shirt-sleeves. I remember noticing the monogram worked on the left silken arm, the fit and swing of immaculate trousers, as smoothly modeled to the hip as a girl's gown; his ever smiling face; the slightly exaggerated way he wiped fingers already clean on a handkerchief pulled from a rear pocket. He was the only unconstrained person in the room; he hardly looked surprised; his glance was merely inquiring. Edwards apparently couldn't stand it. He jumped up and began his characteristic pacing of one end of the constricted place, jerking out as he walked,

"Bronse, it's my fault that Boyne sent for you. He's working on this trouble of Worth's, you know. He's had me in here, grilling me, shaking me over hell; and something I said—God knows why—sent him after you."

"Trouble of Worth's!" Vandeman had been about to sit; his half bent knees straightened out again; he stood beside the chair and spoke irritably. "Told you, Boyne, if you meddled with that coroner's verdict you'd get your employer in the devil of a tight place. Nobody had any reason for wanting Worth's father out of the way—except Worth, himself. Frankly, I think you're wrong. But everything that I can do—of course—"

"All right," I said, letting it fly at him. "Where was your wife from seven to half past nine on the evening of Gilbert's murder?"

Back went his head; out flashed all the fine teeth; the man laughed in my face.

"Excuse me, Mr. Boyne. I understand that this is serious—nothing funny about it—but really, you know, recalling the date, what you've said is amusing. My dear man," he went on as I stared at him, "please remember, yourself, where Ina was on that particular evening."

"The wedding and reception were done with by seven o'clock," I objected. This ground was familiar with me. I'd been over it in considering what opportunity Laura Bowman would have had for a call on Thomas Gilbert at the required hour. If she could slip away for it, why not Ina Vandeman? As though he read my thoughts and answered them, Vandeman filled in,

"A bride, you know, is dead certain to have at least half a dozen persons with her every minute of the time until she leaves the house on her wedding trip. Ina did, I'm sure. We'll just call her in, and she'll give you their names."

He was up and starting to bring her; I stopped him.

"We'll not bother with those names just now. I'd rather have you—or Mrs. Vandeman—tell me what you suppose would be the entry in Thomas Gilbert's diary for May 31 and June 1, 1916. I have already identified it as the date on which the Bowmans first moved into the Wallace house. I think Mr. Edwards knows something more, but he's not so communicative as you promise to be."

He looked as if he wished he hadn't been so liberal with his assurances. I saw him glance half sulkily at Edwards, as he exclaimed,

"But those diaries are burned—they're burned. Worth told us the other night that he burned them without reading."

At the words, Edwards stopped stock-still, something almost humorous at the back of the suffering gaze he fastened on my face. I met it steadily, then answered Vandeman,

"Doesn't make any difference to anybody that those books are burned. I'd read them; I know what was in them; and I know that three leaves—six pages—covering the entries of May 31 and June 1, 1916, were cut out."

"But what the deuce, Boyne?" Vandeman wrinkled a smooth brow. "What would some leaves gone from Mr. Gilbert's diary four years ago have to do with us here to-day—or even with his recent death?"

"Pardon me," I said shortly. "The matter's not as old as that. True, the stuff was written four years ago; it recorded happenings on those dates; but the ink that was used in marking out a run-over on the next following page was fresh. Anyhow, Mr. Vandeman, we know that a woman came weeping to Mr. Gilbert on the very night of his death, only a short time before his death—as nearly as medical science can determine that—and we believe that she came after those leaves out of the diary, and got them—whatever she had to do to secure them."

I was struck with the difference in the way these two men took inquiry. Edwards had writhed, changed color, started to speak and caught himself back, showed all the agony of a clumsy criminal who dreads the probing that may give him away: temperament; the rotten spot in his affairs. Vandeman, younger, not entangled with an unhappy married woman, sat looking me in the eye, still smiling. The blow I had to deal him would be harder. It concerned his bride; but he'd take punishment well. I proceeded to let him have it.

"I can see that Mr. Edwards has an idea what the entries on those pages covered. He has inadvertently shown me that your wife was the woman who came and got them from Thomas Gilbert on the night he was murdered."

At that he turned on Edwards, and Edwards answered the look with,

"I didn't. On my honor, Bronse, I never mentioned your name or Ina's. The Chinaman told him that—about some woman coming that evening—"

"Mr. Vandeman," I broke in, "there's no use beating about the bush. Chung recognized your wife's voice. She was the woman who came weeping to get those diary leaves."

He took that with astonishing quietness, and,

"Suppose you were shown that she wasn't out of her mother's house?"

"Wouldn't stop me. Allow that her alibi's perfect. Yet you men have something. There's something here I ought to know."

"Something you'll never find out from me," Jim

Edwards' deep voice was full of defiance. "Bronse, I owe you an apology; but you can depend on me to keep my mouth shut."

After a minute's consideration Vandeman said,

"I don't know why we should any of us keep our mouths shut."

Jim Edwards looked utterly bewildered as the man sat there, thinking the thing over, glanced up pleasantly at me and suggested,

"Edwards has a little different slant on this from me. I don't know why I shouldn't state to you exactly what happened—right there in Gilbert's study on the date you mentioned."

"Oh, there did something unusual happen; and you've just remembered it."

"There did something unusual happen, and I've just remembered it, aided thereto by your questions and Edwards' queer looks. Cheer up, old man; we haven't all got your southern chivalry. From a plain, commonsense point of view, what I have to tell is not in the least to my wife's discredit. In fact, I'm proud of her all the way through."

Jim Edwards came suddenly and nervously to his feet, strode to the further corner of the room and sat down at as great a distance from Vandeman as its dimensions would permit. He turned his face to the small window there, and through all that Vandeman said, kept up a steady, maddening tattoo with his fingernails on the sill.

"This has to do with what I told you the first night I ever talked with you, Boyne. You threw doubt on Thomas Gilbert's death being suicide. I gave as a reason for my belief that it was, a knowledge and conviction that the man's mind was unhinged."

Edwards' tattoo at the window ceased for a minute. He stared, startled, at the speaker, then went back to it, and Vandeman proceeded,

"I'm not telling Jim Edwards anything he doesn't know, and what I say to you, Boyne, that's discreditable to the dead, I can't avoid. Here it is: on the evening of June first, 1916, I had dinner alone at home. You'll find, if you look at an old calendar, that it falls on a Sunday. Jim Edwards had dined informally at the Thornhills'. As he told it to me later, they were all sitting out on the side porch after dinner, and nobody noticed that Ina wasn't with them until they heard cries coming from somewhere over in the direction of the Gilbert place. At my house, I'd heard it, and we both ran for the garage, where the screams were repeated again and again. We got there about the same time, found the disturbance was in the study, and Edwards who was ahead of me rushed up and hammered on its door."

Again Jim Edwards stopped the nervous drumming of his fingers on the window-sill while he stared at the younger man as at some prodigy of nature. Finally he seemed unable to hold in any longer.

"Hammered on the door!" he repeated. "If you're going to turn out the whole damn' thing to Boyne, tell it straight; door was open; we couldn't have heard a yip out of Ina if it hadn't been. Tom there in full sight, sitting in his desk chair, cool as a cucumber, letting her scream."

"I'm telling this," Vandeman snapped. "Gilbert looked to me like an insane man. Jim, you're crazy as he was, to say anything else. Never supposed for a minute you thought otherwise—that poor girl there, dazed with fright, backed as far away from him as she could get, hair flying, eyes wild."

I looked from one to the other. What Edwards had said of the cold, contemptuous old man; what Vandeman told of the screaming girl; no answer to such a proposition of course but an attempted frame-up. To let the bridegroom get by would best serve my purpose.

"All right, gentlemen," I said. "And now could you tell me what action you took, on this state of affairs?"

"Action?" Vandeman gave me an uneasy look. "What was there to do? Told you I thought the man was crazy."

"And you, Edwards?"

"Let it go as Bronse says. I cut back to Mrs. Thornhill's, scouting to see what the chance was for getting Ina in without the family knowing anything."

"That's right," Vandeman said. "I stayed to fetch her. She was fine. To the last, she let Gilbert save his face—actually send her home as though she were the one to blame. Right then I knew I loved her—wanted her for my wife. On the way home, I asked her and was accepted."

"In spite of the fact that she was engaged to Worth Gilbert?"

"Boyne," he said impatiently, "what's the matter with you? Haven't I made you understand what happened there at the study? She had to break off with the son of a man like that. Ina Thornhill couldn't marry into such a breed."

"Slow up, Vandeman!" Edwards' tone was soft, but when I looked at him, I saw a tawny spark in his black eyes. Vandeman fronted him with the flamboyant embroidered monogram on his shirt sleeve, the carefully careless tie, the utterly good clothes, and, most of all, at the moment, the smug satisfaction in his face of social and human security. I thought of what that Frenchman says about there being nothing so enjoyable to us as the troubles of our friends. "Needn't think you can put it all over the boy when he's not here to defend himself—jump on him because he's down! Tell that your wife discarded him—cast him off—for disgraceful reasons! Damnitall! You and I both heard Tom giving her her orders to break with his son, she sniffling and hunting hairpins over the floor and promising that she would."

"Cut it out!" yelled Vandeman, as though some one had pinched him. "I saw nothing of the sort. I heard nothing of the sort. Neither did you."

I think they had forgotten me, and that they remembered at about the same instant that they were talking before a detective. They both turned, mum and startled looking, Edwards to his window, Vandeman to a nervous brushing of his trouser edges, from which he looked up, inquiring doubtfully,

"What next, Boyne? Jim's excited; but you understand that there's no animus; and my wife and I are entirely at your disposal in this matter."

"Thank you," I said.

"Would you like to talk to her?"

"I would."

"When?"

"Now."

"Where?"

"Here—or let the lady say."

Vandeman gave me a queer look and went out. When he was gone, I found Jim Edwards scrabbling for his hat where it had dropped over behind the desk. I put my back against the door and asked,

"Is Bronson Vandeman a fatuous fool; or does he take me for one?"

"Some men defend their women one way, and some another. Let me out of this, Boyne, before that girl gets here."

"She won't come in a hurry," I smiled. "Her husband's pretty free with his promises; but more than likely I'll have to go after her if I want her."

"Well?" he looked at me uncomfortably.

"Blackmail's a crime, you know, Edwards. A woman capable of it, might be capable of murder."

"You've got the wrong word there, Boyne. This wasn't exactly blackmail."

"What, then?"

"The girl—I never liked her—never thought she was good enough for Worth—but she was engaged to him, and—in this I think she was fighting for her hand."

He searched my face and went on cautiously,

"You read the diaries. They must have had complaints of her."

"They had," I assented.

"Anything about money?"

I shook my head.

"You said there were two entries gone; the first would have told you, I suppose—Before we go further, Boyne, let me make a little explanation to you—for the girl's sake."

"Shoot," I said.

"It was this way," he sighed. "Thornhill, Ina's father, made fifteen or twenty thousand a year I would say, and the family lived it up. He had a stroke and died in a week's time. Left Mrs. Thornhill with her daughters, her big house, her fine social position—and mighty little to keep it up on. Ina is the eldest. She got the worst of it, because at the first of her being a young lady she was used to having all the money she wanted to spend. The twins were right on her heels; the thing for her to do was to make a good marriage, and make it quick. But she got engaged to Worth; then he went to France. There you were. He might never come back. Tom always hated her; watched her like a hawk; got onto something she—about—"

"Out with it," I said. "What? Come down to cases."

"Money." He uttered the one word and stood silent.

I made a long shot, with,

"Mr. Gilbert found she'd been getting money from other men—"

"Borrowing, Boyne—they used the word 'borrowed,' " Edwards put in. "It was always Tom's way to summon people as though he had a little private judgment bar, haul them up and lecture them; I suppose he thought he had a special license in her case."

"And she went prepared to frame him and bluff him to a standoff. Is that the way you saw it?"

"My opinion—what I might think," said Mr. James Edwards of Sunnyvale ranch, "wouldn't be testimony in a court of law. You don't want it, Boyne."

"Maybe not," I grunted. "Perhaps I could make as good a guess as you could at what young Mrs. Vandeman's capable of; a dolly face, and behind it the courage of hell."

"Boyne," he said, as I left the door free to him, "quit making war on women."

"Can't," I grinned and waved him on out. "The detective business would be a total loss without 'em."

CHAPTER XXII

A DINNER INVITATION

"LOOK what's after you, man," Skeet warned me from her lofty perch as I went out through the big room in quest of Ina Vandeman. "Better you stay here. I gif you a yob. Lots safer—only run the risk of getting your neck broken."

I grinned up into her jolly, freckled face, and waited for the woman who came toward me with that elastic, swinging movement of hers, the well-opened eyes studying me, keeping all their secrets behind them.

"Mr. Boyne," a hand on my arm guided me to a side door; we stepped together out on to a small balcony that led to the lawn. "My husband brought me your message. Nobody over by the tennis court; let's go and walk up and down there."

Her fingers remained on my sleeve as we moved off; she emphasized her points from time to time by a slight pressure.

"Such a relief to have a man like you in charge of this investigation." She gave me an intimate smile; tall as she was, her face was almost on a level with my own, yet I still found her eyes unreadable, none of those quick tremors under the skin that register the emotions of excitable humanity. She remained a handsome, perfectly groomed, and entirely unruffled young woman.

"Thank you," was all I said.

"Mr. Vandeman and I understand how very, very serious this is. Of course, now, neighbors and intimates of Mr. Gilbert are under inspection. Everybody's private affairs are liable to be turned out. We've all got to take our medicine. No use feeling personal resentment."

Fine; but she'd have done better to keep her hands off me. An old police detective knows too much of the class of women who use that lever. I looked at them now, white, delicate, many-ringed, much more expressive than her face, and I thought them capable of anything.

"Here are the names you'll want," she fumbled in the girdle of her gown, brought out a paper and passed it over. "These are the ones who stayed after the reception, went up to my room with me, and helped me change—or rather, hindered me."

"The ones," I didn't open the paper yet, just looked at her across it, "who were with you all the time from the reception till you left the house for San Francisco?"

"It's like this," again she smiled at me, "the five whose names are on that paper might any one of them have been in and out of my room during the time. I can't say as to that. But *they* can swear that *I* wasn't out of the room—because I wasn't dressed. As soon as I changed from my wedding gown to my traveling suit, I went down stairs and we were all together till we drove to San Francisco and supper at Tait's, where I had the pleasure of meeting you, Mr. Boyne."

"I understand," I said. "They could all speak for you—but you couldn't speak for them." Then I opened and looked. Some list! The social and financial elect of Santa Ysobel: bankers' ladies; prune kings' daughters; persons you couldn't doubt, or buy. But at the top of all was Laura Bowman's name.

We had halted for the turn at the end of the court. I held the paper before her.

"How about this one? Do you think she was in the room all the time? Or have you any recollection?"

The bride moved a little closer and spoke low.

"Laura and the doctor were in the middle of one of their grand rows. She's a bunch of temperament. Mamma was ill; the girls were having to start out with only Laura for chaperone; she said something about going somewhere, and it wouldn't take her long—she'd be back in plenty of time. But whether she went or not—Mr. Boyne, you don't want us to tell you our speculations and guesses? That wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"It wouldn't hurt anything," I countered. "I'll only make use of what can be proven. Anything you say is safe with me."

"Well, then, of course you know all about the situation between Laura and Jim Edwards. Laura was determined she wouldn't go up to San Francisco with her husband—or if she did, he must drive her back the same night. She wouldn't even leave our house to get her things from home; the doctor, poor man, packed some sort of bag for her and brought it over. When he came back with it, she wasn't to be found; and she never did appear until we were getting into the machine."

I listened, glancing anxiously toward the skyline of that little hill over which Worth and Barbara might be expected to appear almost any moment now. Then we made the turn at the end of the court, and my view of it was cut off.

"Laura and Jim—they're the ones this is going to be hard on. I do feel sorry for them. She's always been a problem to her family and friends. A great deal's been overlooked. Everybody likes Jim; but—he's a southerner; intrigue comes natural to them."

Five minutes before I had been listening to Edwards' pitiful defense of this girl; I recalled his "scouting" for a chance to get her home unseen and save her standing with her family. That could be classed as intrigue, too, I suppose. We were strolling slowly toward the clubhouse.

"I don't give Dr. Bowman much," I said deliberately. A quick look came my way, and,

"Mr. Gilbert was greatly attached to him. Everybody's always believed that only Mr. Gilbert's influence held that match together. Now he's dead, and Laura's freed from some sort of control he seemed to have over her, of course she hopes and expects she'll be able to divorce the doctor in peace and marry Jim."

"No movement of the sort yet?"

She stopped and faced round toward me.

"Dr. Bowman—he's our family physician, you know—is trying for a very fine position away from here, in an exclusive sanitarium. Divorce proceedings coming now would ruin his chances. But I don't know how long he can persuade Laura to hold off. She's in a strange mood; I can't make her out, myself. She disliked Gilbert; yet his death seems to have upset her frightfully."

"You say she didn't like Mr. Gilbert?"

"They hated each other. But—he was so peculiar

—of course that wasn't strange. Many people detested him. Bron never did. He always forgave him everything because he said he was insane. Bron told you my experience—the one that made me break with Worth?"

She looked at me, a level look; no shifting of color, no flutter of eyelid or throat. We were at the club-house steps.

"Here comes the boy himself," I warned as Worth and Barbara, their arms full of ferns, rounded the turn from the little dip at the side of the grounds where the stream went through. We stood and waited for them.

"You two," Ina spoke quickly to them. "Mr. Boyne's just promised to come over to dinner to-morrow night." Her glance asked me to accept the fib and the invitation. "I want both of you."

"I'm going to be at your house anyhow, Ina," Barbara said, "working with Skeet painting those big banners they've tacked up out in your court. You'll have to feed us; but we'll be pretty messy. I don't know about a dinner party."

"It isn't," Ina protested, smiling. "It's just what you said—feeding you. Nobody there besides yourself and Skeet but Mr. Boyne and Worth—if he'll come."

"I have to go up to San Francisco to-morrow," said Worth.

"But you'll be back by dinner time?" Ina added quickly.

"If I make it at all."

"Well, you can come just as you are, if you get in at the last minute," she said, and he and Barbara went on to carry their ferns in. When they were out of hearing, she turned and floored me with,

"Mr. Vandeman has forbidden me to say this to you, but I'm going to speak. If Worth doesn't have to be told about me—and his father—I'd be glad."

"If the missing leaves of the diary are ever found," I came up slowly, "he'd probably know then." I watched her as I said it. What a strange look of satisfaction in the little curves about her mouth as she spoke next:

"Those leaves will never be found, Mr. Boyne. I burned them. Mr. Gilbert presented them to me as a wedding gift. He was insane, but, intending to take his own life, I think even his strangely warped conscience refused to let a lying record stand against an innocent girl who had never done him any harm."

We stood silent a moment, then she looked round at me brightly with,

"You're coming to dinner to-morrow night? So glad to have you. At seven o'clock. Well—if this is all, then?" and at my nod, she went up the steps, turning at the side door to smile and wave at me.

What a woman! I could but admire her nerve. If her alibi proved copper-fastened, as something told me it would, I had no more hope of bringing home the murder of Thomas Gilbert to Mrs. Bronson Vandeman of Santa Ysobel than I had of readjusting the stars in their courses!

CHAPTER XXIII

A BIT OF SILK

I MUST admit that when Worth and Barbara walked up and found me talking to Ina Vandeman, I felt caught dead to rights. The girl gave me one long, steady look. I was afraid of Barbara Wallace's eyes. Then and there I relinquished all idea of having her help in this inquiry. She could have done it much better than I, attracted less attention—but no matter. The awkward moment went by, however; I heaved a sigh of relief as they carried their ferns on into the clubhouse, and Mrs. Vandeman left me with gracious good-bys.

I had the luck to cover my first inquiry by getting a lift into town from Mrs. Ormsby, young wife of the president of the First National. Alone with me in her little electric, she answered every question I cared to put, and said she would be careful to speak to no one of the matter. Three others I caught on the wing, as it were, busy at blossom festival affairs; the fête only one day off now, things were moving fast. I glimpsed Dr. Bowman down town and thought he rather carefully avoided seeing me. His wife was taking no part; the word went that she was not able; but when I called at what had been the Wallace and was now the Bowman home, I found the front door open and two ladies in the hall.

One of them, Laura Bowman herself, came flying out to meet me—or rather, it seemed, to stop me, with a face of dismay.

"My mother's here, Mr. Boyne!" Her hand was clammy cold; she'd been warned of me and my errand. "I don't want to take you through that way."

I stood passive, and let her do the saying.

"Around here," she faltered. "We can go in at the side door."

We skirted the house by a narrow walk; she was leading the way by this other entrance, when, spread out over its low step, blocking our progress, I saw a small Japanese woman ripping up a satin dress.

"Let us pass, Oomie."

"Wait. We can talk as well here," I checked her. We moved on a few paces, out of earshot of the girl; but before I could put my questions, she began with a sort of shattered vehemence to protest that Thomas Gilbert's death was suicide.

"It was, Mr. Boyne. Anybody who knew the scourge Thomas had been to those he must have loved in his queer, distorted way, and any one who loved them, could believe he might take his own life."

"You speak freely, Mrs. Bowman," I said. "Then you hated the man?"

"Oh, I did! For years past I've never heard of a death without wondering that God took other human beings and let him live. Now that he's killed himself, it seems dreadful to me that suspicion should be cast on—"

"Mrs. Bowman," I interrupted. "Thomas Gilbert's death was murder. All persons who could have had motive or might have had opportunity to kill him will be under suspicion till the investigation clears them of it. I'm now ascertaining the whereabouts of Ina Vandeman that evening."

A shudder went through her; she looked at me feelingly, twisting her hands together in the way I remembered. Despite her distress, she was very simple and accessible. She gave me no resistance, admitted her absence from the Thornhill house at about the time the party was ready to start for San Francisco—Edwards, of course. I got nothing new here. She seemed thankful enough to go into the house when I released her.

I lingered a moment to have a word with the little Japanese woman on the step.

"How long you work this place?"

"Two hours af-noon, every day," ducking and giggling like a mechanical toy.

Just a piece-worker, not a regular servant.

"Pretty dress," I touched the satin on the step. "Whose?"

"Mine." Grinning, she spread a breadth out over her knees. "Lady no like any more. Mine." It was a peculiar shade of peacock blue; unless I was mistaken, the one Mrs. Bowman had worn that night at Tait's.

"Hello—what's this?" I bent to examine a small hole in the hem of that breadth Oomie was so delightedly smoothing.

"O-o-o-o! I think may-may burn'm. Not like any more."

There was a small round hole. Just so a cigarette might have seared—or a bullet.

"Not can use," I said to Oomie, indicating the injured bit. "Cut that off. Give me." And I laid a silver dollar on the step.

Giggling, the little brown woman snipped out the bit of hem and handed it to me. I glanced up from tucking it into my pocket, and saw Laura Bowman's white face staring at me through the glass of that side entry door.

A suggestive lead, certainly; but it's my way to follow one lead at a time: I went on to the Thornhill place.

Everybody there would know my errand; for though, with taste I could but admire, Ina had put no name of any member of the family on her list, she of course expected me to call on them, and would never have let her sisters leave the country club without a warning.

The three were just taking their hats off in the hall when I arrived. I did my questioning there, not troubling to take them separately. Cora and Ernestine, a well bred pair of Inas, without her pep, perhaps a shade less good looking, made their replies with none of the usual flutter of feminine curiosity and excitement, then went on in the living room. Skeet of course was as practical and brief as a sensible boy.

"I don't know whether she's fit to see you," she said when I spoke of her mother. And on the instant, Ina Vandeman's clear, high voice called down the stair,

"Bring Mr. Boyne up—now."

Skeet stepped aside for me to pass. I suppose I looked as startled as I felt, for on my way to the house, I had seen Mrs. Vandeman drive past toward town. I stood there at a loss, and finally said aimlessly,

"Your sister thinks it's all right?"

"My sister?" Skeet wrinkled her brows at me, and glanced to where the twins were in sight in the living room. "That was mother herself who called you."

All the way up the stairs, Skeet following, I was trying to swing my rather heavy wits around to take advantage of this new development. So far, Ina Vandeman's voice, imitated by Barbara Wallace, and recognized by Chung and Jim Edwards, possibly by Worth, had been my lead in this direction. If more than one woman spoke in that voice—where would it take me?

I'd got no adjustment before I was ushered into a large dim room, and confronted by a figure in a reclining chair by the window. Here, in spite of years and illness, were the same good looks and thoroughbred courage that seemed to characterize the women of this family. Mrs. Thornhill greeted me in Ina Vandeman's very tones, a little high-pitched for real sweetness, full of a dominating quality, and she showed a composure I had not expected. To Skeet, standing by, watching to see that her mother didn't overdo in talking to me, she said,

"Dear, go down stairs. Jane's left her dinner on the range and gone to the grocery. You look after it while she's away."

When we were alone, she lay back in her chair, eyes closed, or seemingly so, and made her statement. She'd been in her daughter's room only twice between the reception and that daughter's going away.

"But the room was full of other people," a glimmer between lashes. "I could give you the names of those others."

"Thank you," I said. "Mrs. Vandeman has already done that. I've seen them all."

"You've seen them—all?" a long, furtively drawn breath. Then her eyes flashed open and fixed themselves on me. Relief was there, yet something stricken, as they traveled over me from my gray thatch to my big feet.

"Now, Mrs. Thornhill," I said, "aside from those two visits to your daughter's room, where were you that evening?"

A slow flush crept into her thin cheeks. The unreadable eyes that were traveling over Jerry Boyne stopped suddenly and held him with a quiet stare.

"I understood it was my daughter's movements on that evening you wished to trace, Mr. Boyne," she said slowly. "It would be difficult to trace mine. Really, I had so much on my hands with the reception and inefficient help—" She broke off, her eyes never leaving my own, even as she added smoothly, "It would be very, very difficult."

There is an effect in class almost like the distinction of race. These women spoke a baffling language; their psychology was hard for me. If there was something hid up amongst them that ought to be uncovered by diplomacy and delicate indirection, it would take a smarter man than the one who stood in my number tens to do it.

"Mrs. Thornhill," I said, "you did leave the house. You went to Mr. Gilbert's study. The shot that killed him left you a nervous wreck, so that you can't hear a tire blow-out without reënacting in your mind the scene of that murder. You'll talk now."

"You think I will? Talk to you?" very low and quiet, eyes once more closed.

"Why not? It's got to come; here in your own home, with me—or I'll have to put you where you'll be forced to answer questions."

"Oh, you threaten me, do you?" Her eyes flashed open, and looked at me, hard as flint. "Very well. I'll answer no questions as to what happened on the evening of Thomas Gilbert's death, except in the presence of Worth Gilbert, his son."

My retirement down the Thornhill stairs, made with such dignity as I could muster, was in fact, a panic flight. Halfway, Cora Thornhill all but finished me by looking out from the living room, and calling in Ina Vandeman's voice,

"Erne, show Mr. Boyne out, won't you?"

Ernestine completed the job when she answered—in Ina Vandeman's voice, also—

"Yes, dear; I will." It was only the scraps of me that she swept out through the front door.

I stood on the porch and mopped my brow. Across there at the Gilbert place was Worth himself, charging around the grounds with Vandeman and a lot of other decorators, pruning shears in hand, going for a thicket of bamboos that shut off the vegetable garden. At one side Barbara stood alone, looking, it seemed to me, rather depressed. I made for her. She met me with,

"I know what you've been doing. Skeet came to me about it while Ina was phoning home from the country club."

"Well—she should worry! I've just finished with her list. Got an unbreakable alibi."

"She would have," Barbara said listlessly. "She wasn't at the study that evening."

"Huh! I worked on your tip that she was."

Barbara had pulled off the little stitched hat she wore; yet the deep flush on her cheeks was neither from sun nor an afternoon's hard work. It, and the quick straightening of her figure, the lift of her chin, had to do with me and my activities.

"Mr. Boyne," the black eyes came around to me with a flash, "do you suspect me of trying to pay off a spite on Ina Vandeman?"

"Good Lord—no!" I exploded. "And anyhow, I've just found that what you imitated and Chung recognized, might as well have been the mother's voice as the daughter's."

"Yes," she assented. "Any one of the family—under stress of emotion." Then suddenly, "And why do I tell you that? You'll not get from it what I do. I ought never to have mixed up my kind of mental work with other people's. I'd promised my own soul that I would never make another deduction. Then Worth came and asked me—that night at Tait's. I might say now that I never will any more. . . ." She broke off, storm in her eyes and in her voice as she finished, "But I suppose if he wanted me to again—I'd make a little fool of myself for his amusement just as I did this time and have done all these other times!"

"I'll not ask anything more of you, Barbara," I said to her hastily, confused and abashed before the glimpse she'd given me of her heart. "Except that

I beg you to stay good friends with Cummings. That man hates Worth. If you turned him down now—say, for the ball, or anything like that—he'd be twice as hard for us to handle. Keep him a passive enemy instead of an active one, as long as he seems to find it necessary to hang around Santa Ysobel."

"You know what's holding Mr. Cummings here, don't you?" She glanced somberly past the bamboo gatherers to where we saw a gray corner of the study with its pink ivy geranium blossoms atop. "Mr. Cummings is held here by two steel bolts—the bolts on those study doors. Until he finds how they can be moved through an inch of planking—he'll not leave Santa Ysobel."

She'd put it in a nutshell. And I couldn't let him beat me to it. I'd got to get the jump on him.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MAGNET

I HAD all set for next morning: my roadster at Capehart's for repair, old Bill tipped off that I didn't want any one but Eddie Hughes to work on it; and to add to my satisfaction, there arrived in my daily grist from the office, the report that they had Skeels in jail at Tiajuana.

"Well, Jerry, old socks," Worth hailed my news as I followed out to his car where he was starting for San Francisco, and going to drop me at the Capehart garage, "Some luck! If Skeels is in jail at Tiajuana, and what I'm after to-day turns out right, we may have both ends of the string."

Pink-and-white were the miles of orchards surrounding Santa Ysobel, pink-and-white nearly all the dooryards, every tree its own little carnival of bloom with bees for guests. Already the streets were full of life, double the usual traffic. As we neared the Capehart cottage, on its quiet side street about half a block from the garage, there was Barbara under the apple boughs at the gate, talking to some man whose back was to us. She bowed; I answered with a wave toward the garage; but Worth scooted us past without, I thought, once glancing her way, sent the roadster across Main where he should have stopped and let me out, went on and into the highway at a clip which rocked us.

"Was that Cummings?" holding my hat on. No answer that I could hear, while we made speed toward San Francisco. And still no word was spoken until we had outraged the sensibilities of all whose bad luck it was to meet us, those whom we passed going at a more reasonable pace, scared a team of work horses into the ditch, and settled down to a steady whiz.

We were getting away from Santa Ysobel a good deal further and a good deal faster than I felt I could afford. I took a chance and remarked, to nobody in particular, and in a loud voice,

"I asked Barbara not to make a break with Cummings; it would be awkward for us now if she did."

"Break?" Worth gave me back one of my words.

"Yes. I was afraid she might throw him down for the carnival ball."

Without comment or reply, he slowed gently for the big turn where the Medlow road comes in, swept a handsome circle and headed back. Then he remarked,

"Thought I'd show you what the little boat could do under my management. Eddie had her in fair shape, but I've tuned her up a notch or two since."

I responded with proper enthusiasm, and would have been perfectly willing to be let out at Main Street. But he turned the corner there, ran on to the garage, jumped out and followed me in. Bill, selling some used tires to a customer in the office, nodded and let us go past to where my machine stood. We heard voices back in the repair shop and a hum of swift whirring shafts and pulleys. Worth kept with me. It embarrassed me—made me nervous. It was as though he had some notion of my purpose there. Hughes, at his lathe, caught sight of us and growled over his shoulder,

"Yer machine's ready."

This wouldn't do. I stepped to the door, with,

"Fixed the radiator, did you?"

"Sure. Whaddye think?" Hughes was at work on something for a girl; she perched at one end of his bench, swinging her feet. Worth, behind me, touched my shoulder, and I saw that the girl over there was Barbara Wallace.

She looked up at us and smiled. The sun slanting through dirt covered windows, made color effects on her silken black hair. Eddie gave us another scowl and went on with his work.

"Hello, Bobs," Worth's greeting was casual. "Thought I'd stop and tell you I was on my way—you know." A glance of understanding passed between them. "Better come along?"

"I'd like to," she smiled. "You'll be back by dinner time. If it wasn't the last day, and I hadn't promised—"

Neither of them in any hurry.

"Hughes," I said, "there's another thing needs doing on that car of mine—"

"Can't do nothing at all till I finish her job," he shrugged me off.

"All right," and I stepped through into the grassy back yard, put a smoke in my face, and began walking up and down, my glance, each time I turned, encountering that queer bunch inside: Worth, hands in pockets; the chauffeur he had discharged—and that I was waiting to get for murder—bending at his vise;

Barbara's shining dark head close to the tousled unkemptness of his poll, as she explained to him the pulley arrangement needed to raise and anchor the banner she and Skeet were painting.

Suddenly, at the far end of my beat, I was brought up by a little outcry and stir. As I wheeled toward the door, I saw Bobs and Worth in it, apparently wrestling over something. Laughing, crying, she hung to his wrist with one hand, the other covering one of her eyes.

"Let me look!" he demanded. "I won't touch it, if you don't want me to. You have got something in there, Bobs."

But when she reluctantly gave him his chance, he treacherously went for her with a corner of his handkerchief in the traditional way, and she backed off, uttering a cry that fetched Hughes around from the lathe, roaring at Worth, above the noise of the machinery,

"What's the matter with her?"

"Steel splinter—in her eye," Worth shouted.

With a quick oath, the belt pole was thrown to stop the lathe; down the length of the shop to the scrap heap of odds and ends at the rear Hughes raced, returning with a bit of metal in his hand. Barbara was backed against the bench, her eyes shut, and tears had begun to flow from under the lids.

"Now, Miss Barbie," Hughes remonstrated. "You let me at that thing. This'll pull it out and never touch you." I saw it was a horse-shoe magnet he carried.

"Do you think it will?"

"Sure," and Eddie approached the magnet to her face. "It won't hurt you a-tall. She'll begin to pull before she even touches. Now, steady. Want to come as near contact as I can. Don't jump. . . . Hell!"

Barbara had sprung away from him. But for Worth's quick arm, she would have been into the machines.

"No!" she said between locked teeth, tears on her cheeks, "I can't let him."

"Why, Barbara!" I said, astonished; and poor Eddie almost blubbered as he begged,

"Aw, come on, Miss Barbie. It was my fault in the first place—leavin' that damned lathe run. Yuh got to let me—"

"But if it doesn't work?"

"Sure it'll work. Would I offer to use it for you if I hadn't tried it out lots o' times—to pull splinters and—"

"Give me that magnet," Worth reached the long arm of authority, got what he wanted, shouldered Hughes aside, and took hold of the girl with, "Quit being a little fool, Barbara. That thing's only caught in your lashes now. Let it get in against the eyeball and you'll have trouble. Hold still."

The command was not needed. Without a word, Barbara raised her face, put her hands behind her and waited.

Delicately, Worth caught the dark fringe of the closed eye, turned back the lid so that he could see just what he was at, brought the horse-shoe almost in touch, then drew it away—and there was the tiny steel splinter that could have cost her sight, clinging to the magnet's edge.

"Here you are," he smiled. "Wasn't that enough to call you names for?"

"You didn't call me names," dabbing away with a small handkerchief. "You told me to quit being a little fool. Maybe I will. How would you like that?"

Apparently Hughes did not resent Barbara's refusing his help and accepting Worth's. He went back to his vise; the two others strolled together through the doorway into the garage, talking there for a moment in quick, low tones; then Barbara returned to perch on the end of Eddie's bench, play with the magnet and watch him at work. I lit up again and stepped out.

I could see Barbara gather some nails, screws and loose pieces of iron, hold a bit of board over them, and trail the magnet back and forth along its top. Though a half inch of wood intervened, the metal trash on the bench followed the magnet to and fro. I got nothing out of that except that Barbara was still a child, playing like a child, till I looked up suddenly to find that she had ceased the play, brought her feet up to curl them under her in the familiar Buddha pose, while the busy hands were dropped and folded before her. Her rebellion of yesterday evening—and now her taking up the concentration unasked—she wouldn't want me to notice what she was doing; I ducked out of sight. I had walked up and down that yard a half dozen times more, when over me with a rush came the significance of those moving bits of iron, trailing a magnet on the other side of a board. Three long steps took me to the door.

"Hughes," I shouted, "I'm taking my machine now. Be back directly."

The man grunted without turning around. I had forgotten Barbara, but as I was climbing into the roadster, I heard her jump to the floor and start after me.

"Mr. Boyne! Wait! Mr. Boyne!"

I checked and sat grinning as she came up, the magnet in her hand. I reached for it.

"Give me that," I whispered. "Want to go along and see me use it?"

"No—no—" in hushed protest. "You're making a mistake, Mr. Boyne."

"Mistake? I saw what you did in there. Said you never would again—then went right to it! You sure got something this time! Girl—girl! You've turned the trick!"

"Oh, *no!* You mustn't take it like that, Mr. Boyne. This is nothing—as it stands. Just a single unrelated fact that I used with others to concentrate on. Wait. Do wait—till Worth comes back, anyhow."

"All right." I felt that our voices were getting loud, that we'd talked here too long. No use of flushing the game before I was loaded. "First thing to do is to verify this." I felt good all over.

"Yes, of course," she smiled faintly. "You would want to do that." And she climbed in beside me.

I drove so fast that Barbara had no chance to question me, though she did find openings for remonstrating at my speed. I dashed into the driveway of the Gilbert place and came to an abrupt stop at the doors of the garage. And right away I bumped up against my first check. I gripped the magnet, raced to the study door with it, she following more slowly to watch while I passed it along the wooden panel where the bolt ran on the other side; and nothing doing!

Again she followed as I ran around to the outside door, opened up and tried it on the bare bolt itself; no stir. While she sat in the desk chair at that central table, her elbows on its top, her hands lightly clasped, the chin dropped in interlaced fingers, following my movements with very little interest, I puffed and worked, opened a door and tried to move the bolt when it wasn't in the socket, and felt like cursing in disappointment.

"A little oil—" I grumbled, more to myself than to her, and hurried to the garage workbench for the can that would certainly be there. It was, but I didn't touch it. What I did lean over and clutch from where they lay tossed in carelessly among rubbish and old spare parts, were three more magnets exactly the same as the one we had brought from Capehart's. I sprinted back with them.

"Barbara," I called in an undertone. "Come here. Look."

Held side by side, the four, working as one, moved the bolts as well as fingers could have done, and through more than an inch of hard wood.

"Yes," she looked at it; "but that doesn't prove Eddie Hughes the murderer."

"No?" her opposition began to get on my nerves. "I'm afraid that'll be a matter for twelve good men and true to settle." She stood silent, and I added, "I know now whose shadow I saw on the broken panel of that door there, the first Sunday night."

"Oh, it was Eddie's," she agreed rather unexpectedly.

"And he came to steal the 1920 diary," I supplied.

"He came to get a drink from the cellaret, and a cigar from the case. That's the use he made of his power to move these bolts."

"Until the Saturday night when he killed his employer, the man he hated, and left things so the crime would pass as suicide. Barbara, are you just plain perverse?"

Instead of answering, she went back to the table, got the contraption Hughes had made for her, and started as if to leave me. On the threshold, she hesitated.

"I don't suppose there's anything I can say or do to change your mind," her tone was inert, drained. "I know that Eddie is innocent of this. But you don't want to listen to deductions."

"Later," I said to her, briskly. "It'll keep. I've something to do now."

"What? You promised Worth to make no move against Eddie Hughes until you had his permission." She seemed to think that settled it. I let her keep the idea.

"Run along, Barbara," I said, "get to your paint daubing. I'll forgive you everything for deducing—well, discovering, if you like that better—about these bolts and magnets."

Skeet burst from the kitchen door of the Thornhill house, caught sight of us, shouted something unintelligible, and came racing through the grounds toward Vandeman's.

"Been waiting for me long, angel?" she called, as Barbara moved up with a lagging step, then, waving two pairs of overalls, "Got pants for both of us, honey.

The paints and brushes are over there. We'll make short work of that old banner, now."

Promised Worth, had I? But the situation was changed since then. No man of sense could object to my moving on what I had now. I locked the study door, went back to my roadster, and headed her uptown.

CHAPTER XXV

AN ARREST

IT was a thankful if not a joyous Jerry Boyne who crossed the front pergola of the Vandeman bungalow that evening in the wake of Worth Gilbert, bound for an informal dinner. The tall, unconscious lad who stepped ahead of me had been made safe in spite of himself. This weight off my mind, I felt kindly to the whole world, to the man under whose dining table we were to stretch our legs, whose embarrassing private affairs I had uncovered. He'd taken it well—seconding his wife's dinner invitation, meeting my eye frankly whenever we encountered. My mood was expansive. When Vandeman himself opened the door to us, explaining that he was his own butler for the day, I saw him quite other than he had ever appeared to me.

For one thing, here in his own house—and this was the first time I had ever been in it—you got the man with his proper background, his suitable atmosphere. The handsome living room into which he took us, showed many old pieces of mahogany, and some of the finest oriental stuff I ever saw; books in cases, sets of standard writers, such as people of culture bought thirty or forty years ago, some family pictures about. This was Vandeman; a lot behind such a fellow, after all, if he did seem rather a lightweight.

Ina joined us, very beautifully dressed. She also showed the ability to sink unpleasant considerations in the present moment of hospitality. We lingered a moment chatting, then,

"Shall we go and look at the artists working?" she suggested, and led the way. We followed out onto a flagged terrace at the rear. A dozen great muslin strips were tacked over the walls there, and two small figures, desperate, smudged, wearing the blue overalls Skeet Thornhill had waved at us, toiled manfully smearing the blossom festival colors on in lettering and ornamental designs.

"Ina!" Skeet yawped at her sister, "Another dirty, low Irish trick! Get yourself all dressed up like a sore thumb, and then show us off in this fix!"

Mutely Barbara revolved on the box she occupied. There was fire in her soft eyes; her color was high as her glance came to rest on Worth.

"Fong Ling's nearly ready to serve dinner," said Ina calmly. "Stop fussing, and go wash up."

"Hello, Mr. Boyne." As Skeet passed me, she wiped a paw on a paint rag and offered it to me without another word. I got a grip and a look that told me there was no hangover with her from that scene yesterday in her mother's sick-room. Vandeman was commenting on his depleted bamboo clumps.

"Mine suffered worse than yours, Worth. Fong Ling kicked like a bay steer about our taking so much. He's nursed the stuff for years like a fond mother. But we had to have it for that effect up around the orchestra stand."

"Then he's been with you a long time?" I caught at the chance for information on this chink—information that I'd found it impossible to get from the chink himself.

"Ever since I came in here. Chinamen, you know —not like Japs. Some loyalty. You can keep a good one for half a lifetime."

We strolled back to the living room; the girls were there before us, Skeet picking out bits of plum-blossoms and bunches of cherry bloom from a great bowl on the mantel, and sticking them in Barbara's dark hair, wreath fashion.

"Best we could do at a splurge," she greeted us, "was to turn in our blouses at the neck."

"And what in the world are you doing to Barbara?" Mrs. Vandeman said sharply. "Let her alone, Skeet. You'll make her look ridiculous."

Skeet stuck out her tongue at her sister, and went calmly on, mumbling as she worked,

"Hold 'till 'ittle Barbie child. Yook up at pretty mans and hold 'till."

Over the mantel, in front of Barbara as she stood, her back to us all, hung an oil painting—one of those family groups—same old popper; same old mommer, and a fat baby in a white dress and blue sash. At that, it was good enough to show that the man had some resemblance to Vandeman as he leaned there on the mantel below it, rather encouraging Skeet's enterprise. From the other side, I could see Barbara's glance go from man to picture.

"Doesn't it look like Van, Barbie?" Skeet kept up the conversation. "Got the same ring, and all. But it ain't Van. Him's the tootsie in there with the blue ribbon round his tummy."

"I say, Skeeter, lay off!" Vandeman looked self-consciously from the painted ring in the picture to the real ring on his own well kept hand there on the mantel edge. "People aren't interested in family histories."

"I am," said Barbara, unexpectedly. As the gong sounded and we all began to move toward the dining room, they were still on the subject and kept it up after we were seated.

Fong Ling served us. The bride had Worth on her right, and talked to him in lowered tones. Barbara, between Vandeman and myself, continued to show an almost feverish attention to Vandeman. It was plain enough from where I sat that nothing Ina Vandeman could say gave the lad any less interest in his plate. But I suppose with a girl, the mere fact of some other girl being allowed to show intentions counts. Did the flapper get what was going on, as she looked proudly across at her handiwork, and demanded of me,

"Say, Mr. Boyne, you saw how Ina tried to do us dirt? And now, honest to goodness, hasn't Barbie with the plum-blossoms got Ina and her artificial flowers skun a mile?"

I didn't wonder that young Mrs. Vandeman saved me the necessity of answering, by taking her up.

"Skeet, you're too outrageous!"

There she sat, quite a beauty in a very superior fashion; and Worth at her side, was having his attention called to this dark young creature across the table, whose wonderful still fire, the white blossoms crowning her hair, might well have made even a lovelier than Ina Vandeman look insipid. And Worth did take his time admiring her; I saw that; but all he found to say was, "Bobs, I suppose Jerry's told you that he's treed Clayte at Tiajuana?"

"No," said Barbara, "he hasn't said a word. But I'm just as much surprised at Clayte's being caught as I was at Skeels escaping capture."

"Say that over and say it slow," Vandeman was good natured. "Or rather, put it in plain American, so we all can understand."

"Mr. Boyne knows what I mean." Barbara gave me a faint smile. "Mr. Boyne and I add up Skeels and Clayte, and get a different result. That's all."

"Bobs doesn't think that Skeels is Clayte, caught or uncaught," Worth said briefly and went on eating his dinner. Apparently he didn't give a hang which way the fact turned out to be.

"Why don't you?" Vandeman gave passing attention. She shook her head and put it.

"Skeels, at liberty, was quite possibly Clayte; Skeels captured cannot be Clayte. Mr. Boyne, do you call that a paradox?"

"No—an unkind slam at a poor old man's ability in his profession. I started out to find a gang; but Clayte and Skeels are so exactly one, mentally, morally and physically, that I don't see why we should seek further."

"Back up, Jerry," Worth tossed it over at me. "Let Barbara"—he didn't often use the girl's full name that way—"give you a description of Clayte before you're so sure."

"How could I?" The girl's tone was defensive. "I never saw him."

"I want you," Worth paid no attention to her objections, "to describe the man you thought you were asking for that day at the Gold Nugget, when Jerry butted in, and your ideas got lost in the excitement about Skeels. Deduce the description, I mean."

"Deduce it?" Barbara spoke stiffly, incredulously, her glance going from Worth to the well-gowned, well-groomed woman beside him. I remembered her moment of rebellion yesterday evening on the lawn, when she said so bitterly that if he asked it again, she'd do it again, as she finished, "Deduce—here?"

"Here and now." Worth's laconic answer sent the blood of healthy anger into her face, made her eyes shine. And it brought from Ina Vandeman a petulant,

"Oh, Worth, please don't turn my dinner table into a side-show."

"Ina, dear." Vandeman raised his eyes at her, then quite the cordial host urging a guest to display talent, "They say you're wonderful at that sort of thing, and I've never seen it."

Barbara was mad for fair.

"Oh, very well," she spoke pointedly to Vandeman, and left Worth out of it. "If you think you'd really enjoy seeing me make a side-show of Ina's dinner table—"

She stopped and waited. Vandeman played up to the situation as he saw it, with one of his ready smiles. Worth threw no life-line. Ina didn't think it worth while to apologize for her rudeness. Skeet was openly in a twitter of anticipation. There was nothing for me to do. A little commotion of skirts told us that she was drawing up her feet to sit cross-legged in her chair.

"She's going to! Oh, golly!" Skeet chortled. "Haven't seen Bobsy do one of those stunts since I was a che-ild!"

Arms down, hands clasped, eyes growing bigger, face paling into snow, we watched her. To all but Vandeman, this was a more or less familiar performance. They took it rather as a matter of course. It was the Chinaman, coming in with the coffee tray, who seemed most strangely affected by it. He stopped where he was in the doorway, rigid, staring at our girl, though with a changeful light in his eye that seemed to me to shift between an unreasonable admiration and an unreasonable fear. Orientals are superstitious; but what could the fellow be afraid of in the beautiful young thing, Buddha posed, blossoms in her hair? The girl had gone into her stunt with a sort of angry energy. He seemed to clutch himself to stillness for the brief time that it held. Only in the moment that she relaxed, and we knew that Barbara had concentrated, Barbara was Barbara again, did he move quietly forward, a decent, competent servant, stepping around the table, placing our cups.

"Just two facts to go on," she said coldly. "My results will be pretty general."

"Nothing to go on in the way of a description of Clayte," I tried to help her out. "I'd call that one we had of him as near nothing as it well could be."

"Yes, the nothingness of it was one of my facts," she said, and stopped.

"Let's hear what you did get, Bobs," Worth prompted; and Skeet giggled, half under her breath,

"Speech! Speech!"

"At the Gold Nugget—whatever he called himself there—Edward Clayte was ten years younger than he had seemed at the bank; he appeared to weigh a dozen pounds more; threw out his chest, walked with his head up, and therefore would have been estimated quite a bit taller. This personality was an opposite of the other. Bank clerk Clayte was demure, unobtrusive; this man wore loud patterns. The bank clerk was silent; this man talked to every one around him, tilted his hat over one eye, smoked cigars just as those men were doing that day in the lobby; acted like them, was one of them. In the Gold Nugget, Clayte was a very average Gold Nugget guest—don't you see? Commonplace there, just as the other Clayte had been commonplace in a bank or an office."

Her voice ceased. On the silence it left, Worth spoke up quietly,

"Bull's eye as usual, Bobs. Every word you say is true. And at the Gold Nugget, his name was Henry J. Brundage. He had room thirty on the top floor."

Skeet clapped her hands, jumped up and came around the table to kiss Barbara on the ear, and tell her she was the most wonderfullest girl in the world.

"Heh!" I flared at Worth. "Find that all out to-day in San Francisco?"

"No."

"Oh, it was the Brundage clew that took you south?"

"Yep. Left Louie on the job at the hotel while I was away. To-day, I went after Brundage's automobile. Found he'd kept one in a garage on Jackson Street."

"It's gone, of course—and no trace," Barbara murmured.

"Gone since the day of the bank theft," Worth nodded. "He and the money went in it."

"Say,'" I leaned over toward him, "wouldn't it have saved wear and tear if you'd told me at the first that you knew Skeels couldn't be Clayte?"

"Oh, but, Jerry, you were so sure! And Skeels wasn't possible for a minute—never in his little, piking, tin-horn life!"

I don't believe I had seen Worth so happy since he was a boy, playing detective. I glanced around and pulled myself up; we certainly weren't making ourselves very entertaining for the Vandemans. There they sat, at their own table, like handsome figureheads, smiling politely, pretending a decent interest.

"All this must be a bore to you people," I apologized.

"Not at all—not at all," Vandeman assured us.

"Well then if you don't mind—Worth, I'll go and use Vandeman's phone—put my office wise to these Brundage clews of yours."

Worth nodded. No social scruples were his. I had by no means given up the belief that Skeels in jail at Tiajuana, would still turn out to be one of the gang.

I had just got back to the table from my phoning when the doorbell rang; we saw the big Chinese slip noiselessly through the rear into the hall to answer it, coming back a moment later, announcing in his weighty, correct English,

"Two gentlemen calling—to see Captain Gilbert."

"Ask for me?" Worth came to his feet in surprise. "Who told them I was here?"

"I do not know," the Chinaman spoke unnecessarily as Worth was crossing to the door. "I did not ask them that."

"Use the living room, Worth," Vandeman called after him. "We'll wait here."

With the closing of the door, conversation languished. Even Skeet was quiet and seemed depressed. My ears were straining for any sound from in there. As I sat, hand dropped at my side, I suddenly felt under shelter of the screening tablecloth, cold, nervous fingers slipped into mine. Barbara wasn't looking at me, but I gave her a quick glance as I pressed her gripping small hand encouragingly.

She was turned toward Vandeman. Pale to the lips, her great eyes fixed on the eyes of our host, I saw with wonder how he slowly stirred a spoon about in his emptied coffee cup, and stared back at her with a face almost as colorless as her own. The bride glanced from one to the other of them, and spoke sharply,

"What's the matter with you two? You're not uneasy about Worth's callers, are you?"

"No-no-no—" Vandeman was the first to come out of it, responding to her voice a good deal as if she dashed cold water in his face, his eyes breaking away from Barbara's, his lips parted in a nervous smile. He ran a hand through his hair—an inelegant gesture for him at table—and laughed a little.

"We ought to be in there," Barbara said to me, a curious stress in her voice.

"How funny you talk, Barbie," Skeet quavered. "What do you think's wrong?" And Ina spoke decidedly, "Worth is one person in the world who can certainly take care of himself, and would rather be let alone."

"If you think there is anything we should do—?" Vandeman began anxiously, and Skeet took a look around at our faces and fairly wailed,

"What is it? What's the matter? What do you think they're doing to Worth in there, Barbie?"

"I'd think they were arresting him," Barbara said in a low, choked tone, "Only they don't know—"

"Arresting him!" I broke in on her, startled, getting halfway to my feet; then as remembrance came to me, sinking back with, "Certainly not. The murderer of Thomas Gilbert is already in the county jail. I arrested Eddie Hughes this morning."

"You arrested—Eddie Hughes!" It was a cry from Barbara. The cold little hand was jerked from mine. Twisting around in her chair, she stared at me with a look that made me cold. "Then you've moved those two steel bolts for Cummings."

I jumped to my feet. On the instant the door opened, and in it stood Worth, steady enough, but his brown tanned face was strangely bleached.

"Jerry," he spoke briefly. "I want you. The sheriff's come for me."

CHAPTER XXVI

MRS. BOWMAN SPEAKS

MIDNIGHT in the sheriff's office at San Jose. And I had to telephone Barbara. She'd be waiting up for my message. The minute I heard her voice on the wire, I plunged in:

"Yes, yes, yes; done all I could. A horse can do no more. They've got Worth. I—" The words stuck in my throat; but they had to come out—"I left him in a cell."

A sound came over the wire; whether speech or not, it was something I couldn't get.

"He's taking it like a man and a soldier, girl," I hurried. "Not a word out of him about my having gone counter to his express orders, arrested Hughes, and pulled this thing over on us."

"Oh, Mr. Boyne! Of course he wouldn't blame you. Neither would I. You acted for what you thought was his good. The others—"

"Vandeman's already gone home. Tell you he stood by well, Barbara—that tailor's dummy! Surprised me. No, no. Didn't let Jim Edwards come with us; so broken up I didn't want him along—only hurt our case over here, the way he is now."

"Your case?" she spoke out clearly. "What is the situation?"

"A murder charge against Worth on the secret files.

Hughes is out—Cummings got him—took him, don't know where. Can't locate him."

"Do you need to?"

"Perhaps not, Barbara. What I do need is some one who saw Thomas Gilbert alive that night after Worth left to go back to San Francisco."

"And if you had that—some one?"

"If we could produce before Cummings one credible witness to that, it would mean an alibi. I'd have Worth out before morning."

"Then, Mr. Boyne, get to the Fremont House here as quickly as you can. Mr. Cummings is there. Get him out of bed if you have to. I'll bring the proof you need."

"But, child!" I began.

"Don't—waste—time—talking! How long will it take you to get here?"

"Half an hour."

"Oh! You may have to wait for me a little. But I'll surely come. Wait in Mr. Cummings' room."

Half past twelve when I reached the Fremont House, to find it all alight, its lobby and corridors surging with the crowd of blossom festival guests. Nobody much in the bar; soft drinks held little interest; but in the upper halls, getting to Cummings' room, I passed more than one open door where the hip-pocket cargoes were unloading, and was even hailed by name, with invitations to come in and partake. Cummings was still up. The first word he gave me was,

"Dykeman's here."

"Glad of it," I said. "Bring him in. I want you both."

It took a good deal of argument before he brought the Western Cereal man from the adjoining room where he had evidently been just getting ready for bed. He came to the conference resentful as a soreheaded old bear.

"Maybe you think Worth Gilbert will sleep well to-night—in jail?" I stopped him, and instantly differentiated the two men before me. Cummings took it, with an ugly little half smile; Dykeman rumpled his hair, and bolstered his anger by shouting at me,

"This country'll go to the dogs if we make an exempt class of our returned soldiers. Break the laws—they'll have to take the consequences, just as a man that was too old or too sickly to fight would have to take 'em. If I'd done what Captain Gilbert's done—I wouldn't expect mercy."

"You mean, if you'd done what you say he's done," I countered. "Nothing proved yet."

"Nothing proved?" Dykeman huddled in his chair and shivered. Cummings shook out an overcoat and helped him into it. He settled back with a protesting air of being about to leave us, and finished squeakily, "Didn't need to prove that he had Clayte's suitcase."

"Good Lord, Mr. Dykeman! You're not lending yourself to accuse a man like Worth Gilbert of so grave a crime as murder, just because you found his ideas irregular—maybe reckless—in a matter of money?"

"Don't answer, Dykeman!" Cummings jumped in. "Boyne's trying to get you to talk."

The old chap stared at me doubtfully, then broke loose with a snort,

"See here, Boyne, you can't get away from it; your man Gilbert has embarked on a criminal career: mixed up in the robbery of our bank, with Clayte to rob us; had our own attorney go through the form of raising money to buy us off from the pursuit of Clayte—"

"How about me?" I stuck in the question as he paused for breath. "Do you think Worth Gilbert would put me on the track of a man he didn't want found?"

Cummings cut in ahead to answer for him,

"Just the point. You've not done any good at the inquiry; never will, so long as you stand with Worth Gilbert. He needed a detective who would believe in him through thick and thin. And he found such a man in you."

I could not deny it when Dykeman yipped at me,

"Ain't that true? If it was anybody else, wouldn't you see the connection? Captain Gilbert came here to Santa Ysobel that Saturday night—as we've got witnesses to testify—had a row with his father—we've got witnesses for that, too—the word money passed between them again and again in that quarrel—and then the young man had the nerve to walk into our bank next morning with his father's entire holdings of our stock in Clayte's suitcase—Boyne, you're crazy!"

"Maybe not," I said, reckoning on something human in Dykeman to appeal to. "You see I know where Worth got that suitcase. It came out of my office vault—evidence we'd gathered in the Clayte hunt. Getting it and using it that way was his idea of humor, I suppose."

"Sounds fishy." Dykeman made an uncomfortable shift in his chair. But Cummings came close, and standing, hands rammed down in the pockets of his coat, let me have it savagely.

"Evidence, Boyne, is the only thing that would give you a license to rout men out at this time of night—new evidence. Have you got it? If not—"

"Wait." I preferred to stop him before he told me to get out. "Wait." I looked at my watch. In the silence we could hear the words of a yawp from one of the noisy rooms when a passerby was hailed:

"There she goes! There—look at the chickens!"

A minute later, a tap sounded on the door. Cummings stood by while I opened it to Barbara, and a slender, veiled woman, taller by half a head in spite of bent shoulders and the droop of weakness which made the girl's supporting arm apparently necessary.

At sight of them, Dykeman had come to his feet, biting off an exclamation, looking vainly around the bare room for chairs, then suggesting,

"Get some from my room, Boyne."

I went through the connecting door to fetch a couple. When I came back, Barbara was still standing, but her companion had sunk into the seat the shivering, uncomfortable old man offered, and Cummings was bringing a glass of water for her. She sipped it, still under the shield of her veil. This was never Ina Vandeman. Could it be that Barbara had dragged Mrs. Thornhill from her bed? I saw Barbara bend and whisper reassuringly. Then the veil was swept back, it caught and carried the hat with it from Laura Bowman's shining, copper colored hair, and the doctor's wife sat there ghastly pale, evidently very weak, but more composed than I had ever seen her.

"I'm all right now," she spoke very low.

"Miss Wallace," Dykeman demanded harshly. "Who is this—lady?"

"Mrs. Bowman," Barbara looked her employer very straight in the eye.

"Heh?" he barked. "Any relation to Dr. Bowman —any connection with him?"

"His wife." Cummings bent and mumbled to the older man for a moment.

"Laura," Barbara said gently, "this is Mr. Dykeman. You're to tell him and Mr. Cummings."

"Yes," breathed Mrs. Bowman. "I'll tell them. I'm ready to tell anybody. There's nothing in dodging, and hiding, and being afraid. I'm done with it. Now—what is it you want to know?"

Cummings' expression said plainer than words that they didn't want to know anything. They had their case fixed up and their man arrested, and they didn't wish to be disturbed. She went on quickly, of herself,

"I believe I was the last person who saw Mr. Gilbert alive. I must have been. I'd rushed over there, just as Ina told you, Mr. Boyne, between the reception and our getting off for San Francisco."

"All this concerns the early part of the evening," put in Cummings.

"Yes—but it concerns Worth, too. He was there when I came in. . . . It was very painful."

"The quarrel between Captain Gilbert and his father d'ye mean?" Dykeman asked his first question. Mrs. Bowman nodded assent.

"Thomas went right on, before me, just as though I hadn't been there. Then, when it came my turn, he would have spoken out before Worth of—of my private affairs. That was his way. But I couldn't stand it. I went with Worth out to his machine. He had it in the back road. We talked there a little while, and Worth drove away, going fast, headed for San Francisco."

"And that was the last time you saw Thomas Gilbert alive?" Cummings summed up for her.

"I hadn't finished," she objected mildly. "After Worth was gone, I went back into the study and pleaded with Thomas for a long time. I pointed out to him that if I'd sinned, I'd certainly suffered, and what I asked was no more than the right any human being has, even if they may be so unfortunate as to be born a woman."

Dykeman looked exquisitely miserable; but Cummings was only the lawyer getting rid of an unwanted witness, as he warned her,

"Not the slightest need to go into your personal matters, Mrs. Bowman. We know them already. We knew also of your visit to Mr. Gilbert's study that night, and that you didn't go there alone. Had the testimony been of any importance to us, we'd have called in both you and James Edwards."

I could see that her deep concern for another steadied Laura Bowman.

"How do you know all this?" she demanded. "Who told you?"

"Your husband, Doctor Bowman."

Up came the red in her face, her eyes shone with anger.

"He did follow me, then? I thought I saw him creeping through the shrubbery on the lawn."

"He did follow you. He has told us of your being at the study—the two of you—when young Gilbert was there."

"See here, Cummings," I put in, "if Bowman was around the place, then he knows that Worth left before the crime was committed. Why hasn't he told you so?"

"He has," Cummings said neatly; and I felt as though something had slipped. Barbara kept a brave front, but Mrs. Bowman moaned audibly.

"And still you've charged Worth Gilbert? Why not Bowman himself? He was there. As much reason to suspect him as any of the others. Do you mean to tell me that you won't accept Mrs. Bowman's testimony—and Dr. Bowman's—as proving an alibi for Worth Gilbert? I'm ready to swear that he was at Tait's at five minutes past ten, was there continuously from that time until a little after midnight, when you yourself saw him there."

"A little past midnight!" Cummings repeated my words half derisively. "Not good enough, Boyne. We base our charge on the medical statement that Mr. Gilbert met his death in the small hours of Sunday morning."

I looked away from Barbara; I couldn't bear her eye. After a stunned silence, I asked,

"Whose? Who makes that statement?"

"His own physician. Doctor Bowman swears—"

"He?" Mrs. Bowman half rose from her chair. "He'd swear to anything. I—"

"Don't say any more," Cummings cut her off. And Dykeman mumbled,

"Had the whole history of your marital infelicities all over the shop. Too bad such things had to be dragged in. Man seems to be a worthy person—"

"Doctor Bowman told me positively," I broke in, "on the Sunday night the body was found, that death must have occured before midnight."

"Gave that as his opinion—his opinion—then," Cummings corrected me.

"Yes," I accepted the correction. "That was his opinion before he quarreled with Worth. Now he—"

"Slandering Bowman won't get you anywhere, Boyne," Cummings said. "He wasn't here to testify at the inquest. Man alive, you know that nothing but sworn testimony counts."

"I wouldn't believe that man's oath," I said shortly.

"Think you'll find a jury will," smirked Cummings, and Dykeman croaked in,

"A mighty credible witness—a mighty credible witness!"

While these pleasant remarks flew back and forth, a thumping and bumping had made itself heard in the hall. Now something came against our door, as though a large bundle had been thrown at the panels. The knob rattled, jerked, was turned, and a man appeared on the threshold, swaying unsteadily. Two others, who seemed to have been holding him back, let go all at once, and he lurched a step into the room. Doctor Anthony Bowman.

A minute he stood blinking, staring, then he caught sight of his wife and bawled out,

"She's here all right. Tol' you she was here. Can't fool me. Saw her go past in the hall."

I looked triumphantly at Dykeman and Cummings. Their star witness—drunk as a lord! So far he seemed to have sensed nothing in the room but his wife. Without turning, he reached behind him and slammed the door in the faces of those who had brought him, then advanced weavingly on the woman, with,

"Get up from there. Get your hat. I'll show you. You come 'long home with me! Ain't I your husband?"

"Doctor Bowman," peppery little old Dykeman spoke up from the depths of his chair. "Your wife was brought here to a—to a—"

"Meeting," Cummings supplied hastily.

"Huh?" Bowman wheeled and saw us. "Why-ee! Di'n' know so many gen'lemen here."

"Yes," the lawyer put a hand on his shoulder. "Conference—over the evidence in the Gilbert case. No time like the present for you to say—"

"Hol' on a minute," Bowman raised a hand with dignity.

"Cummings," said Dykeman disgustedly, "the man's drunk!"

"No, no," owlishly. " 'm not 'ntoxicated. Overcome with 'motion." He took a brace. "That woman there—'f I sh'd tell you—walk into hotel room, find her with three men! Three of 'em!"

"How much of this are these ladies to stand for?" I demanded.

"Ladies?" Bowman roared suddenly. "She's m' wife. Where's th' other man? Nothing 'gainst you gen'lmen. Where's he? I'll settle with him. Let that thing go long 'nough. Too long. Bring him out. I'll settle him now!"

He dropped heavily into the chair Cummings shoved up behind him, stared around, drooped a bit, pulled himself together, and looked at us; then his head went forward on his neck, a long breath sounded—

"And you'll keep Worth Gilbert in jail, run the risk of a suit for false imprisonment—on that!" I wanted to know.

"And plenty more," the lawyer held steady, but I saw his uneasiness with every snore Bowman drew.

Barbara crossed to speak low and earnestly to Dykeman. I heard most of his answer—shaken, but disposed to hang on,

"Girl like you is too much influenced by the man in the case. Hero worship—all that sort of thing. An outlaw is an outlaw. This isn't a personal matter. Mr. Cummings and I are merely doing our duty as good citizens."

At that, I think it possible that Dykeman would have listened to reason; it was Cummings who broke in uncontrollably,

"Barbara Wallace, I was your father's friend. I'm yours—if you'll let me be. I can't stand by while you entangle yourself with a criminal like Worth Gilbert. For your sake, if for no other reason, I would be determined to show him up as what he is: a thief —and his father's murderer."

Silence in the room, except the irregular snoring of Bowman, a rustle and a deeply taken breath now and again where Mrs. Bowman sat, her head bent, quietly weeping. On this, Barbara who spoke out clearly,

"Those were the last words you will ever say to me, Mr. Cummings, unless you should some time be man enough to take back your aspersions and apologize for them."

He gave ground instantly. I had not thought that dry voice of his could contain what now came into it.

"Barbara, I didn't mean—you don't understand—"

But without turning her head, she spoke to me: "Mr. Boyne, will you take Laura and me home?" gathering up Mrs. Bowman's hat and veil, shaking the latter out, getting her charge ready as a mother might a child. "She's not going back to him—ever again." Her glance passed over the sleeping lump of a man in his chair. "Sarah'll make a place for her at our house to-night."

"See here," Cummings got between us and the door. "I can't let you go like this. I feel—"

"Mr. Dykeman," Barbara turned quietly to her employer, "could we pass out through your room?"

"Certainly," the little man was brisk to make a way for us. "I want you to know, Miss Wallace, that I, too, feel—I, too, feel—"

I don't know what it was that Dykeman felt, but Cummings felt my rude elbow in his chest as I pushed him unceremoniously aside, and opened the door he had blocked, remarking,

"We go out as we came in. This way, Barbara."

It was as I parted with the two of them at the Capehart gate that I drew out and handed Mrs. Bowman a small piece of dull blue silk, a round hole in it, such as a bullet or a cigarette might have made, with,

"I guess you'll just have to forgive me that."

"I don't need to forgive it," her gaze swam. "I saw your mistake. But it was for Worth you were fighting even then; he's been so dear to me always—I'd have to love any one for anything they did for his sake."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

TWO hours sleep, bath, breakfast, and I started on my early morning run for the county seat. Nobody else was going my way; but even at that hour, the road was full of autos, buggies, farm wagons, pretty much everything that could run on wheels, headed for the festival, all trimmed and streaming with the blossoming branches of their orchards. These were the country folks, coming in early to make a big day of it; orchardists; ranchers from the cattle lands in the south end of the county; truck and vegetable farmers; flower-seed gardeners; the Japs and Chinese from their little, closely cultivated patches; this tide streamed past me on my left hand, as I made my way to Worth and the jailer's office, trying with every mile I put behind me, to bolster my courage. Why wasn't this shift of the enemy a blessing in disguise? Let their setting of the hour for the murder stick, and wouldn't Worth's alibi be better than any we should have been able to dig up for him before midnight?

From time to time I was troubled by recollection of Barbara's crushed look from the moment they sprung it on us, but brushed that aside with the obvious explanation that her efforts in bringing Mrs. Bowman to speak out had just been of no use; surely enough to depress her.

Worth met me, fit, quiet, not over eager about anything. They let us talk with a guard outside the door. Once alone, he listened appreciatively while I told him of our interview with Cummings and Dykeman as fast as I could pile the words out.

"Nobody on earth like Bobs," was his sole comment. "Never was, never will be."

"And now," I reminded him nervously, "there's the question of this alibi. You went straight from the restaurant to your room at the Palace and to bed there?"

"No-o," he said slowly. "No, I didn't."

"Well—well," I broke in. "If you stopped on the way, you can remember where. The people you spoke to will be as good as the clerks and bell-hops at the Palace for your alibi." He sat silent, thoughtful, and I added, "Where did you go from Tait's, Worth?"

"To a garage—in the Tenderloin—where they keep good cars. I'd hired machines from them before."

"Oh, they knew you there? Then their testimony will—"

"I don't believe you want it, Jerry. It only accounts for the half hour—or less—right after I left you; all I did was to hire a car."

"A car," I echoed vaguely. "What kind of a car? Hired it for when?"

"I asked them for the fastest thing they had in the shop. Told 'em to fill it all round, and see that it was tuned up to the last notch. I wanted speed."

"My God, Worth! Do you know what you're telling me?"

"The truth, Jerry." His eye met mine unflinchingly. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Where did you go?" I groaned. "You must have seen somebody who could identify or remember you?"

"Not a solitary human being to identify me. Those I passed—there were people out of course, late as it was—saw my headlights as I went by. But I was moving fast, Jerry. I was working off a grouch; I needed speed."

"Where did you go?"

"Straight down the peninsula on the main highway to Palo Alto, made the sweep across to the sea, and then up the coast road. I ran into the garage about dawn."

"No stops anywhere?"

He shook his head.

"And that's your alibi?"

"That's my alibi." Worth looked at me a long while before he said finally,

"Don't you see, Jerry, that the other side had all this before they encouraged Bowman to change his mind about when father was shot?"

I did see it—ought to have known from the first. This was what they had back of them last night in Cummings' room; this explained the lawyer's smug self-confidence, Dykeman's violent certainty that Worth was a criminal. A realization of this had whitened Barbara's face, set her lips in that pitiful, straight line. As to their momentary chagrin over Bowman; no trouble to them to get other physicians to bolster any opinion he'd given. Medical testimony on such a point is notoriously uncertain. All the jury would want to know was that there could be such a possibility. I sat there with bent head, and felt myself going to pieces. Cummings was right—I was no fit man to handle this job. My personal feelings were too deeply involved. It was Worth's voice that recalled me.

"Cheer up, Jerry, old man. Take it to Bobs."

Take it to Bobs—the idea of a big, husky old police detective running to cast his burden on such shoulders! I couldn't quite do it then. I went and telephoned the little girl that I was doing the best I could—and then ran circles for the rest of the day, chasing one vain hope after another, and finally, in the late afternoon, sneaked home to Santa Ysobel.

Now I had the road more to myself; only an occasional handsome car, where the wealthy were getting in to the part of the festival they'd care for. In the orchards near town where the big picnic places had been laid out with rough board tables and benches, seats for thousands, there were occasional loud basket lunch parties scattered. All at once I was hungry enough to have gone and asked for a handout.

I went by back streets down to the house to get my mail. There seemed no human reason that I should feel it a treachery to have Worth in jail at San Jose, and be able to walk into his house at Santa Ysobel a free man. The place was empty; Chung had the day off, of course. It was possible Worth's cook, even, didn't know what had happened to his employer. Santa Ysobel had no morning paper. In the confusion of the blossom festival, I ventured to guess that not more than a score of people did as yet know of the arrest. Our end of town was drained, quiet; nobody over at the Vandeman bungalow; looking down at the Square as I made my sneak through, I had caught a glimpse of Bronson Vandeman, a great rosette of apricot blossoms on his coat lapel, making his speech of presentation to the cannery girl queen, while his wife, Ina, her fair face shaded doubly by a big flower hat and a blossom covered parasol, listened and looked on.

One of my pieces of mail concerned the Skeels chase. If my men down there had Skeels, and Skeels was Clayte, it would mean everything in handling Cummings and Dykeman. I took out the report and ran hastily through it; a formal statement; day by day stuff:

"Found Skeels and Dial at Tiajuana. Negotiating to buy saloon and gambling house. Arranged with Jefico for arrest of S. (Expense $20.) Rurales took S. to jail. (Expense, $4.50) I interviewed S., and he said he came here to open a business where he could sell booze. D. was his partner in proposition. S. knew nothing of bank affair. Would waive extradition and come back to stand trial at our expense. Interviewed D. He says combined capital of two is $4500., saved from S's business and D's miner's wages. D. said—"

Not much to show up with; but there were three photographs enclosed that I wanted to try on Cummings and Dykeman. No telling where I'd find either, but the Fremont House was my best bet. Getting back there through the crowd, I saw Skeet Thornhill in a corner drugstore, waiting at its counter. I was afoot, having been obliged to park my roadster in one of the spaces set apart for this purpose. I noticed Vandeman's car already there.

I lingered a minute on that corner looking down the slope that led to City Hall Square. Tent restaurants along the way; sandwiches; hot dogs; coffee; milk; pies; doughnuts. Part way down a hurdy-gurdy in a tent began to get patronage again; the school children in white dresses with pink bows in their hair had just finished a stunt in the Square. They and their elders were streaming our way, headed for the snake charmers, performing dogs and Nigger-in-the-tank. In the midst of them Vandeman and his wife came afoot. He caught sight of me, hailed, and when I joined them, asked quickly, glancing toward the drugstore entrance,

"Worth come with you?"

I shook my head. He made that little clucking sound with his tongue that people do when they want to offer sympathy, and find the matter hard to put into words.

A seller of toy balloons on the corner with a lot of noisy youngsters around him; the ka-lash, ka-lam of a mechanical piano further down the block; and young Mrs. Vandeman's staccato tones saying,

"I tell Bron that the only thing Worth's friends can do is to go on exactly as if nothing had happened. Don't you think so, Mr. Boyne?"

I agreed mutely.

"Well, I wish you'd say so to Barbie Wallace," her voice sharpened. "She's certainly acting as though she believed the worst."

"Now, Ina," Vandeman remonstrated. And I asked uncomfortably,

"What's Barbie done? Where is she?"

"Up at Mrs. Capehart's. In her room. Doesn't come out at all. Isn't going to the ball to-night. Skeet said she refused to speak to Mr. Cummings."

"Is that all Skeet said? Vandeman, you've told your wife that Cummings swore to the complaint?"

"Yes, but—er—there's no animus. The executor of Gilbert's estate—With all the talk going around—If Worth's proved innocent, he might in the end be glad of Cummings' action."

"Oh, might he?" Skeet Thornhill had hurried out from the drugstore, a package of medicine in her hand. Her eyes looked as though she'd been crying; they flashed a hostile glance over the new brother-in-law, excellently groomed, the big flower favor on his coat, the tall, beautiful sister, all frilly white and flower festival fashion.

"If Worth's proved innocent!" she flung at them. "Bronse Vandeman, you've got a word too many in when you say that."

"Just a tongue-slip, Skeeter," Vandeman apologized. "I hope the boy'll come through all right—same as you do."

"You don't do anything about it the same as I do!" Skeet came back. "I'd be ashamed to 'hope' for a friend to be cleared of a charge like that. If I couldn't *know* he was clear—clear all the time—I'd try to forget about it."

"See here, Skeet," Ina obviously restrained herself, "that's what we're all trying to do for Worth: forget about it—make nothing of it—act exactly as if it'd never happened. You ought to come on out to the ball with the other girls. You're just staying away because Barbara Wallace is."

"I'm not. Some damn fool went and told mother about Worth being arrested, and made her a lot worse. She's almost crazy. I'd be afraid to leave her alone with old Jane. You get me and this medicine up home—or shall I go around to Capehart's and have Barbie drive me?"

"I'll take you, Skeeter," Vandeman said. "We're through here. We're for home to dress, then to the country club—and not leave it again till morning. That ball out there has got to be made the biggest thing Santa Ysobel ever saw—regardless. Come on." The crowd swallowed them up.

Making for the Fremont House, I passed Dr. Bowman's stairway, and on impulse turned, ran up. I found the doctor packing, very snappish, very sorry for himself. He was leaving next day for a position in the state hospital for the insane at Sefton. His kind have to blow off to somebody; I was it, though he must have known I had no sympathy to offer. The hang-over of last night's drunk made emotional the tone in which he said,

"After all, a man's wife makes or breaks him. Mine's broken me. I could have had a fine position at the Mountain View Sanitarium, well paid, among cultured people, if she'd held up her damned divorce suit a little longer."

"And as it is, you have to put up with what Cummings can land you with such pull as he has."

"I'm not complaining of Cummings," sullenly. "He did the best he could for me, I suppose, on such short notice. But a man of my class is practically wasted in a place of the sort."

I had learned what I wanted; I carried more ammunition to the interview before me. I found Dykeman in his room, propped up in bed, wheezing with an attack of asthma. A sick man is either more merciful than usual, or more unmerciful. Apparently it took Dykeman the former way; he accepted me eagerly, and had me call Cummings from the adjoining room. The lawyer was half into that costume he had brought from San Francisco. He came quite modern as to the legs and feet, but thoroughly ancient in a shirt of mail around the arms and chest, and carrying a Roman helmet in his hand as though it had been an opera hat.

"Trying 'em on?" Dykeman whispered at him.

Cummings nodded with that self-conscious, half-tickled, half-sheepish air that men display when it comes to costume. His greeting to me was cool but not surly. What had happened might go as all in the day's work between detective and lawyer.

"Just seen Bowman," was my first pass at them. "I gather he's not very well pleased with the position you got him; seems to think it small pay for a dirty job."

"What's this? What's this?" croaked Dykeman. "You been getting a place for Bowman, Cummings?"

"Certainly," the lawyer dodged with swift, practical neatness. "I'd promised him my influence in the matter some little time ago."

"Yes," I said, "mighty little time ago—the day he promised the testimony you wanted in the Gilbert case."

"Anything in what Boyne says, Cummings?" Dykeman asked anxiously. "You know I wouldn't stand for that sort of stuff."

The lawyer shook his head, but I didn't believe it was ended between them; Dykeman was the devil to hang on to a point. This would come up again after

I was gone. Meantime I made haste to shove the photographs before them. Cummings passed them back with an indifferent, "What's the idea?"

"You don't recognize him?"

"Never saw the man in my life," and again he asked, "What's the idea?"

"You'd recognize a picture of Clayte?" I countered with a question of my own.

"Yes—I think so," rather dubiously. "But Dykeman would. Show them to him."

Dykeman reached for the photographs, spread them out before him, then looked up from them peevishly to say,

"For the good Lord's sake! Don't look any more like Clayte than it does like a horned toad. Is that what you've been wasting your time over, Boyne? If you ask me—"

"I don't ask you anything," retrieving the pictures, planting them deep in an inner pocket. Then I got myself out of the room.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the Fremont House, I felt sort of bewildered. This last crack had taken all the pep I had left. I suddenly realized it was long after dinner time, and I'd had no dinner, no lunch, nothing to eat since an early breakfast. Worth had sent me to the girl—and I hadn't gone. I dragged myself around to Capehart's cottage as nearly whipped as I ever was in my life.

I found Barbara with Laura Bowman, every one else off the place, out at the shows. Those girls sure were good to me; they fed me and didn't ask questions till I was ready to talk. Nothing to be said really, except that I'd failed. I told them of meeting the

Vandemans, and gave them Ina Vandeman's opinion as to how Worth's friends should conduct themselves just now.

"So they'll all be out there," I concluded, "Vandeman and his wife leading the grand march, her sisters as maids of honor—except Skeet, staying at home with her mother. Cummings goes as a Roman soldier; Doctor Bowman as a Spanish cavalier. Edwards didn't see it as the Vandemans do, but after I'd talked to him awhile, he agreed to be there."

And suddenly I noticed for the first time how the relative position of these two women had shifted. Laura Bowman wasn't red-headed for nothing; out from under the blight of Bowman and that hateful marriage, she had already thrown off some of her physical frailness; the nervous tension showed itself now in energy. She was moving swiftly about putting to rights after my meal while she listened. But Barbara sat looking straight ahead of her; I knew she was seeing streets full of carnival, every friend and acquaintance out at a ball—and Worth in a murderer's cell. It wouldn't do. I jumped to my feet with a brisk,

"Girl, where's your hat? We'll go to the study and look over all our points once more. Get busy—get busy. That's the medicine for you."

She gave me a miserable look and a negative shake of the head; but I still urged, "Worth sent me to you. The last thing he said was, 'Take it to Bobs.' "

Dumbly she submitted. Mrs. Bowman came running with the girl's hat, and, "What about me, Mr. Boyne? Isn't there something I can do?"

"I wish you'd go to the country club—to the ball—

the same as all the others. Got a costume here, haven't you?"

"Yes, I can wear Barbara's," she glanced to where a pile of soft black stuff, a red scarf, a scarlet poppy wreath, lay on a chair, "She was to have gone as 'The Lady of Dreams.' "

Barbara went with me out into the flare of carnival illumination that paled the afterglow of a gorgeous sunset. No cars allowed on these down-town streets; even walking, we found it best to take the long way round. To our left the town roared and racketed as though it was afire. Nothing said between us till I grumbled out,

"I wish I knew where Cummings was keeping Eddie Hughes."

Barbara's voice beside me answered unexpectedly,

"Here. In Santa Ysobel. Eddie was at Capehart's fifteen minutes before you got there; he came for Bill. A gasoline engine at the city hall had broken down."

I pulled up short for a moment, and looked back at the town.

"Where'd he go?"

"With Bill, to the city hall. Eddie's one of the queen's guards. They're all to be at the country club at ten o'clock to review the grand march that opens the ball."

I mustn't let her dwell on that. I hurried on once more, and neither of us spoke again till I unlocked the study door, snapped on the lights, brought out and put on the table the 1920 diary and the little blue blotter—the last bits of evidence that I felt hadn't been thoroughly analysed. Barbara just dropped into a chair and looked from them to me helplessly.

"You've read this all—carefully?" she sighed.

It shook me. To have Barbara, the girl I'd seen get meanings and facts from a written page with a mere flirt of a glance, ask me that. What I really wanted from her was an inspection of the book and blotter, and a deduction from it. As though she guessed, she answered with a sort of wail,

"I can't I can't even remember what I did see when I looked at these before. I—can't—remember!"

I went and knelt on the hearth with a pretext of laying a fire there, since the shut-up room was chill. And when I glanced stealthily over my shoulder, she had gone to work; not as I had ever seen her before, but fumbling at the leaves, hesitating, turning to finger the blotter; setting her lips desperately, like an over-driven school-child, but keeping right on. I spun out my fire building to leave her to herself. Little noises of her moving there at the table; rustle and flutter of the leaves; now and again, a long, sobbing breath. At last something like a groan caused me to turn my head and see her, with face pale as death, eyes staring across into mine.

"It was Clayte—Edward Clayte—who killed Mr. Gilbert here—in this room."

The hair on the back of my neck stirred; I thought the girl had gone mad. As I ran over to the table and looked at what was under her hand, it came again.

"He did. He did. It was Clayte—the wonder man!"

"Do—do you deduce that, Barbara?"

"Did I?" she raised to mine the face of a sick child. "I must have. See—it's here on the blotter: 'y-t-e,' that's Clayte. Double l-e-r; that's 'teller.' 'Avenue' is part of 'Van Ness Avenue Bank.' Oh, yes; I deduced it, I suppose. Both crimes end in a locked room and a perfect alibi. But—but—don't you see, if it is true—and it is—it is—we're worse off than we were before. We've the wonder man against us."

"Barbara," I cried. "Barbara, come out of it!"

"See? You don't believe in me any more," and her head went down on the table.

I let her cry, while I sat and thought. The broken sentences she'd sobbed out to me began to fit up like a puzzle-game. By all theories of good detective work, I should have seen from the first the similarity of these crimes. But Clayte, slipping in here to do this murder—and why? What mixed him up with affairs here? And then the icy pang—Dykeman had seen a connection—Cummings had found one. With them, it was Clayte and his gang—and his gang was Worth Gilbert. I went and touched Barbara on the shoulder.

"I'm going to take you home now."

"Yes," tears running down her face as she stumbled to her feet. "I'm a failure. I can't do anything for Worth."

I wiped her cheeks with my own handkerchief and led her out. As I turned from locking the door, it seemed to me I saw something move in the shrubbery. I asked Barbara Wallace about it. She hadn't noticed anything. Barbara Wallace hadn't noticed anything!

I began to be scared for her. Solemn in the sky above boomed out the town clock—two strokes. Half past nine. I must get this poor child home. We were getting in toward the noise and the light when I felt her shiver, and stopped to say,

"Did I forget your coat? Why, where's your hat?"

"The hat's back there. I had no coat. It doesn't make any difference. Come on. I can't—can't—I must get home."

I looked at her, saw she was about at the end of her strength, and decided quickly,

"We'll go straight through the Square. Save time and steps."

She offered no objection, and we started in where the bands played for the street dances, amid the raucous tooting of a thousand fish-horns, the clangor of cow-bells, and the occasional snap of the forbidden fire-cracker. As we turned from Broad Street into Main, I found that the congestion was greater even than I had supposed. Here, several blocks away from the city hall, progress was so difficult that I took Barbara back a block to get the street that paralleled Main. This we could navigate slowly. Here, also, everybody was masked. Confetti flew, serpentines unreeled themselves out through the air, dusters spluttered in faces, and among the Pierrettes, Pierrots, Columbines, sombrero-ed cowboys, bandana-ed cow-girls, Indians, Sambos, Topsies and Poppy Maidens, Barbara's little white linen slip and soft white sweater, and my grey business suit, were more conspicuous than would have been the Ahkoond of Swat and his Captive Slave. Even after the confetti had sprinkled her black hair until it reminded me of Skeet's blossom wreath, infinitely multiplied, I still saw the glances through the eye-holes of masks follow us wonderingly.

Opposite the city hall, where we must cross to get to the Capehart street, we were again almost stopped by the dense crowd. The Square was a green-turfed dancing floor; from its stand, an orchestra jazzed out the latest and dizziest of dances; and countless couples one-stepped on the grass, on the asphalt of the streets, even over the lawns of adjacent houses, tree trunks and flower beds adding more things to be dodged. At one corner, where the crowd was thick, we saw a big man being wound to a pole by paper serpentines. Yelling and capering, the masked dancers milled around and around him, winding the gay ribbons, while others with confetti and the Spanish cascarones, tried to snow him under. As we came up, a big fist wagged and Bill Capehart's voice roared,

"Hold on! Too much is a-plenty!"

He tore himself loose, streaming with paper strips, bent and filled his fists from the confetti at his feet. His tormentors howled and dropped back as much as they could for the hemming crowd; he rushed them, heaving paper ammunition in a hail-storm, and reached us in two or three jumps.

"Golly!" he roared, "Me for a cyclone cellar! This is a riot. You ain't in costume, either. Wonder they wouldn't pick on you."

With the words they did. I put Barbara behind me, and was conscious only of a blinding snow of paper flakes, the punch and slap of dusters, in an uproar of horns and bells.

"Good deal like fighting a swarm of bees in your shirt-tail with a willow switch," old Bill panted at my shoulder. "Gosh!" as the snapping of firecrackers let loose beneath our feet. "Some o' these mosquito-net skirts 'll get afire next—then there'll be hell a-popping!"

Close at hand there was a louder report, as of a giant cracker, and at that Barbara sagged against me.

I whirled and put an arm about her. Bill grabbed her from me, and lifted her above the pressure of the crowd. I charged ahead, shouting,

"Gangway! Let us through!"

Willing enough, the mob could not make room for passage until my shoulder, lowered to strike at the breast, forced a way, that closed in the instant Bill gained through. It was football tactics, with me bucking the line, Bill carrying the ball. Fortunately, the bunch was a good-natured festival gathering, or my rough work might have brought us trouble. As it was, a short, stiff struggle took us to the outer fringe of the mob.

"How is she? What happened?" I grunted, coming to a stop.

"Search me." Bill twisted around to look at the white face that lay back on his shoulder, with closed lids. Three strokes chimed from the city hall tower. Barbara's eyes flashed open; as the last stroke trembled in the air, Barbara's voice came, sharp with breathless urgence,

"A quarter of ten! Quick—get me to the country club!"

"Take *you* there? Now, d'ye mean?" I ejaculated; and holding her like a baby, Bill's eyes flared into mine. "Did something happen to you back there, girl? Or did you just faint?"

"Never mind about me! There," that glance of hers that saw everything indicated a parking place packed with machines half a block away up a side street. "Carry me there. Take one of those cars. Get me to the country club. Don't—" as I opened my mouth, "don't ask questions."

I turned and ran. Bill galloped behind. Barbara had lifted her head to cry after me,

"The best one! Pick the fastest!"

I plunged down the line of cars, looking for a good machine and one with whose drive I was familiar. The guard rushed up to stop me; I showed him my badge, leaped into the front seat of a speed-built Tarpon, and had it out by the time Bill came up with the girl in his arms. I turned and swung open the tonneau door. Almost with one movement, he lifted her in and climbed after. I started off with braying horn, and at that I had to use caution. Making my way toward the corner of the street that led to Bill's house, I felt a small hand clutch the slack of my coat between the shoulders, and Barbara's voice, faint, but with a fury of determination in it, demanded,

"Where are you going? I said the country club."

"All right; I'll go. I'll look after whatever you want out there when I've got you home."

"Oh, oh," she moaned. "Won't you—this one time—take orders?"

I went on past the corner. She had a right to put it just that way. I gave the Tarpon all I dared in town streets.

"What time is it?" I heard her whispering to Bill. "Eight minutes to ten? I have to be there by ten, or it's no use. Can he make it? Do you think he can make it?"

"Yes," I growled, crouching behind the wheel. "I'll make it. May have to kill a few—but I'll get you there."

By this, we'd come out on the open highway, better, but not too clear, either. There followed seven minutes of ripping through the night, of people who ran yelling to get out of our way and hurled curses behind us, only a few cars meeting us like the whirling of comets in terrifying glimpses as we shot past; and, at last, the country club; strings of gay lanterns, winking ruby tail-lights of machines parked in front of it, the glare from its windows, and the strains of the orchestra in its ballroom, playing "On the Beach at Waikiki." When she heard it, Barbara thanked God with,

"We're in time!"

I took that machine up to the front steps over space never intended for automobiles, at a pace not proper for lawns or even roads, and only halted when I was half across the walk. Bill rolled from the tonneau door and stood by it. I jumped down and came around.

"Lift me out, and put me on my feet," Barbara ordered. "Help me—one on each side. I can walk. I must!"

We crossed a deserted porch; the evening's opening event—the grand march—had drawn every one, servants and all, inside. So far, without challenge, meeting no one. We had the place to ourselves till we stood, the three of us alone, before the upper entrance of the assembly room. In there, the last strains of Waikiki died away. I looked to Barbara. She was in command. Her words back there in town had settled that for me.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

White as the linen she wore, the girl's face shone with some inner fire of passionate resolution. I saw this, too, in the determined, almost desperate energy with which she held herself erect, one clenched hand pressed hard against her side.

"Take me in there, Mr. Boyne. And you," to Capehart, "find a man you can trust to guard each door of the ball-room."

"What you say goes." Big Bill wheeled like a well trained cart-horse and had taken a step or two, when she called after him,

"Arrest any one who attempts to enter."

"Arrest 'em if they try to git in," Capehart repeated stoically. "Sure. That goes." But I interrupted,

"You mean if they try to get out."

At that she gave me a look. No time or breath to waste. Bill, unquestioning, had hurried to his part of the work. I took up mine with, "Forgive me, Barbara. I'll not make that mistake again"; slipped my arm under hers to support her; dragged open the big doors; shoved past the hallman there; and we stepped into the many-colored, moving brilliance of the ball-room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE COUNTRY CLUB BALL

THE ballroom of the country club at Santa Ysobel is big and finely proportioned. I don't know if anything of the sort could have registered with me at the moment, but I remembered afterward my impression of the great hall fairly walled and roofed with fruit blossoms, and the gorgeousness of hundreds of costumes. The mere presence of potential funds raises the importance of an event. The prune kings and apricot barons down there, with their wives and daughters in real brocades, satins and velvets, with genuine jewels flashing over them, represented so much in the way of substantial wealth that it seemed to steady the whole fantastic scene.

Barbara and I entered on the level of the slightly raised orchestra stand and only half a dozen paces from it. Nobody noticed us much; we came in right on the turn of things—floor managers darting around, orchestra with bows poised and horns at lips, the whole glittering company of maskers being made ready to weave their "Figure of Eight" across the dancing floor. My poor girl dragged on my arm; her small feet scuffed; I lifted her along, wishing I might pick her up and carry her as Bill had done. I made for an unoccupied musicians' bench; but once there, she only leaned against it, not letting go her hold on me, and stood to take in every detail of the confused, moving scene.

The double doors had swung closed behind us; the hallman there who held the knob, now reinforced by a uniformed policeman. The servants' way, at the further end was shut; men in plain clothes set their backs against it. And last, Big Bill himself in overalls, a touch of blunt blue realism, came fogging along the side-wall to swing into place the great wooden bar that secured the entire group of glass doors which gave on the porch. Barbara would have seen all these arrangements while I was getting ready for my first glance, but I prompted her nervously with a low-toned, "All set, girl," and then as she still didn't speak, "Bill's got every door guarded."

She nodded. The length of the room away, in the end gallery, was the cannery girl queen and her guard. Even at that distance, I recognized Eddie Hughes, in his pink-and-white Beef Eater togs, a gilded wooden spear in his hand, a flower tassel bobbing beside that long, drab, knobby countenance of his. There he was, the man I'd jailed for Thomas Gilbert's murder. Below on the dancing floor, were the two, Cummings and Bowman, who had put Worth behind the bars for the same crime. At my side was the pale, silent girl who declared that Clayte was the murderer.

Whispered tuning and trying of instruments up here; flutter and rush about down on the dancing floor; and Barbara, that clenched left hand of hers still pressed in hard against her side, facing what problem?

Crash! Boom! We were so close the music fairly deafened us, as, with a multiplied undernote of moving feet, the march began. On came those people toward us, wave behind wave of color and magnificence, dotted with little black ovals of masks pierced by gleaming eyeholes. I could sense Barbara reading the room as it bore down on her, and reading it clearly, getting whatever it was she had come there for. Myself, I was overwhelmed, drowned in the size and sweep of everything, struggling along, whispering to her when I spotted Jim Edwards in his friar's robe, noticed that the Roman soldier who must be Cummings, and Bowman, the Spaniard, squired the Thornhill twins in their geisha girl dresses; the crimson poppies of a Lady of Dreams looked odd against Laura Bowman's coppery hair.

At the head of the procession as they swung around, leading it with splendid dignity, came a pair who might have been Emperor and Empress of China—the Vandemans. To go on with affairs as if nothing had happened—though Worth Gilbert was in jail—had been the laid-down policy of both Vandeman and his wife. I'd thought it reasonable then; foolish to get hot at it now. The great, shining, rhythmically moving line deployed, interwove, and opened out again until at last the floor was almost evenly occupied with the many-colored mass. I looked at Barbara; the awful intensity with which she read her room hurt me. It had nothing to do with that flirt of a glance she always gave a printed page, that mere toss of attention she was apt to offer a problem. The child was in anguish, whether merely the ache of sorrow, or actual bodily pain; I saw how rigidly that small fist still pressed against the knitted wool of her sweater, how her lip was drawn in and bitten. Her physical weakness contrasted strangely with the clean cut decision, the absolute certainty of her mental power. She raised her face and looked straight up into mine.

"Have the music stopped."

I leaned over and down toward the orchestra leader to catch his eye, holding toward him the badge. His glance caught it, and I told him what we wanted. He nodded. For an instant the music flooded on, then at a sharp rap of the baton, broke off in mid-motion, as though some great singing thing had caught its breath. And all the swaying life and color on the floor stopped as suddenly. Barbara had picked the moment that brought Ina Vandeman and her husband squarely facing us. After the first instant's bewilderment, Vandeman and his floor managers couldn't fail to realize that they were being held up by an outsider; with Barbara in full sight up here by the orchestra, they must know who was doing it. I wondered not to have Vandeman in my hair already; but he and his consort stood in dignified silence; it was his committee who came after me, a Mephistopheles, a troubadour, an Indian brave, a Hercules with his club, swarming up the step, wanting to know if I was the man responsible, why the devil I had done it, who the devil I thought I was, anyhow. Others were close behind.

"Edwards," I called to the brown friar, "can you keep these fellows off me for a minute?"

Still not a word from Barbara. Nothing from Vandeman. Less than nothing: I watched in astonishment how the gorgeous leader stopped dumb, while those next him backed into the couple behind, side stepping, so that the whole line yawed, swayed, and began to fall into disorder.

"Cummings," as I glimpsed the lawyer's chain mail and purple feather, "Keep them all in place if you can. All."

In the instant, from behind my shoulder Barbara spoke.

"Have that man—take off his mask."

A little, shaking white hand pointed at the leader.

"Mr. Vandeman," I said. "That's an order. It'll have to be done."

The words froze everything. Hardly a sound or movement in the great crowded room, except the little rustle as some one tried to see better. And there, all eyes on him, Bronson Vandeman stood with his arms at his sides, mute as a fish. Ina fumbled nervously at the cord of her own mask, calling to me in a fierce undertone,

"What do you mean, Mr. Boyne, bringing that girl here to spoil things. This is spite-work."

"Off—take his mask off! Do it yourself!" Barbara's voice was clear and steady.

I made three big jumps of the space between us and the leading couple. Vandeman's committee-men obstructed me, the excited yip going amongst them.

"Vandeman—Bronse—Vannie—Who let this fool in here?—Do we throw him out?"

Then they took the words from Edwards; the tune changed to grumblings of, "What's the matter with Van? Why doesn't he settle it one way or another, and be done?"

Why didn't he? I had but a breath of time to wonder at that, as I shoved a way through. Darn him, like a graven image there, the only mute, immovable thing in that turmoil! I began to feel sore.

"You heard what she said?" I took no trouble now to be civil. "She wants your mask off."

No flicker of response from the man, but the Empress of China dragged down her mask, crying,

"Heard what she said? What she wants?" Over the shoulders of the crowd she gave Barbara Wallace a venomous look, then came at me.

A little too late. My hand had shot out and snatched the mask from the face of China's monarch. A moment I glared, the bit of black stuff in my grasp, at the alien countenance I had uncovered. Crowding and craning of the others to see. Jabbering, exclaiming all around us.

"Corking make-up; looks like a sure-enough Chinaman."

"No make-up at all. The real thing."

"What's the big idea?"

"Why did he unmask, then?"

"Didn't want to. They made him."

And last, but loudest, repeated time and again, with wonder, with distaste, with rising anger,

"The Vandeman's Chinese cook!"

For with the ripping away of that black oval, I had looked into the slant, inscrutable eyes of Fong Ling. Hemmed in by the crowd, he could but face me; he did so with a kind of unhuman passivity.

And the committee went wild. Their own masks came off on the run. I saw Cummings' face, Bowman's; Eddie Hughes slid from the balcony stair and bucked the crowd, pushing through to the seat of war. The grand march had become a jostling, gabbling chaos.

Barbara, up there, above it all, knew what she was about. I had utter confidence in her. But she was plainly holding back for a further development, her eyes on the entrances; and what the devil was my next move?

Ina Vandeman wheeled where she stood and faced the room, both hands thrown up, laughing.

"It was meant to be a joke—a great, big foolish joke!" her high treble rang out. "Bron's here somewhere. Wait. He'll tell you better than I could. At a masquerade—people do—they do foolish things. . . . They—"

"Is Bronse Vandeman here?" I questioned Fong Ling. The Chinaman's stiff lips moved for the first time, in his formal, precise English.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Vandeman will explain." He crossed his hands and resigned the matter to his employer. And I demanded of Ina Vandeman, "You tell us your husband's present—in this room? Now?" and when her answer was drowned in the noise, I roared,

"Vandeman! Bronson Vandeman! You're wanted here!"

No answer. Edwards took up the call after me; the committee yelled the name in all keys and variations. In the middle of our squawking, a minor disturbance broke out across by the porch entrance, where Big Bill Capehart stood. As I looked, he turned over his post to Eddie Hughes, who came abreast of him at the moment, and started, scuffling and struggling toward us, with a captive.

"I had my orders!" his big voice boomed out. "Pinch any one that tried to get in. Y'don't pass me—not if you was own cousin to God A'mighty!"

On they came through the crowd, all mixed up; blue overalls, and a flapping costume whose rich, many-colored silk embroideries, flashed like jewels. A space widened about us for them. The big garage man spun his catch to the center of it, so that he faced the room, his back to the orchestra.

"Wanted in, did ya? Now yer in, what about it?"

What about it, indeed? In Bill's prisoner, as he stood there twitching ineffectually against that obstinate hold, breathing loud, shakily settling his clothes, we had, robe for robe, cap for cap, a duplicate Emperor of China!

And the next moment, this figure took off its mask and showed the face of Bronson Vandeman.

Dead silence all about us; Capehart loosened his grip, abashed but still truculent.

"Dang it all, Mr. Vandeman, if you didn't want to get mussed up, what made you fight like that?"

"Fight?" Vandeman found his voice. "Who wouldn't? I was late, and you—"

"Bron!" After one desperate glance toward the girl up on the platform, Ina ran to him and put a hand on his arm. "They stopped the march. . . . Your—the—they spoiled our joke. But have them start the music again. You're here now. Let's go on with the march . . . explain afterward."

"Good business!" Vandeman filled his chest, glanced across at Fong Ling, and gave his social circle a rather poor version of the usual white-toothed smile. "Jokes can wait—especially busted ones. On with the dance; let joy be unrefined!"

Sidelong, I saw the orchestra leader's baton go up. But no music followed. It was at Barbara the baton had pointed, at Barbara that all the crowded company stared. Her little white dress clung to her slender figure. I saw that now she was in the strange Buddha pose. A few flecks of silver paper, still in her black hair, made it sparkle. But it was Barbara's eyes that held us all spellbound. In her colorless face those wonderful openings of black light seemed to look through and beyond us. For an instant there was no stir. Hundreds of faces set toward her, held by the wonder of her. Fong Ling's yellow visage moved for the first time from its immobility with a sort of awe, a dread. And when my gaze came back to her, I noticed that, with the dropping of her hands to join the fingertips, she had left, where that little, pressing fist had been, a blur of red on the white sweater. Over me it rushed with the force of calamity, she had been wounded when she sank down back there in the crowd. It was a shot—not a giant cracker—we had heard.

"Vandeman," I whirled on him, "You shot this girl. You tried to kill her."

Sensation enough among the others; but I doubt if he even heard me. His gaze had found Barbara; all the bounce, all the jauntiness was out of the man, as he stared with the same haunted fear his eyes had held when she concentrated last night at his own dinner table.

She was concentrating now; could she stand the strain of it, with its weakening of the heart action, its pumping all the blood to the brain? I shouldered my way to her, and knelt beside her, begging,

"Don't, Barbara. Give it up, girl. You can't stand this."

Her hands unclasped. Her eyes grew normal. She relaxed, sighingly. I leaned closer while she whispered to me the last addition in that problem of two and two—the full solution. Armed, I faced Vandeman once more.

Something seemed to be giving way in the man; his lips were almost as pale as his face, and that had been, from the moment he uncovered it, like tallow. He looked withered, smaller; his hair where it had been pressed down by mask and cap, crossed his forehead, flat, smooth, dull brown. I saw, half consciously, that Fong Ling was gone. An accomplice? No matter; the criminal himself was here—Barbara's wonder man. It was to him I spoke.

"Edward Clayte," at the name, Cummings clanked around front to stare. "I hold a warrant for your arrest for the theft of nine hundred and eighty seven thousand dollars from the Van Ness Avenue Savings Bank of San Francisco."

He made a sick effort to square his shoulders; fumbled with his hair to toss it back from its straight-down sleekness, as Clayte, to the pompadoured crest of Vandeman. How often I had seen that gesture, not understanding its significance. Cummings, at my side, drew in a breath, with,

"Why—damn it!—he is Clayte!"

"All right," I let the words go from the corner of my mouth at the lawyer, in the same hushed tones he'd used. "See how you like this next one," and finished, loud enough so all might hear,

"And I charge you, Edward Clayte—Bronson Vandeman—with the murder of Thomas Gilbert."

CHAPTER XXIX

UNMASKED

DISGRACE was in the air; the country club had seen its vice president in handcuffs. There was a great gathering up of petticoats and raising of moral umbrellas to keep clear of the dirty splashings. It made me think of a certain social occasion in Israel some thousands of years ago, when Absalom, at his own party, put a raw one over on his brother Amnon, and all the rest of King David's sons looked at each other with jaws sagging, and "every man gat himself up upon his mule and fled." Here, it was limousines; more than one noble chariot—filled with members of the faction who'd helped to rush Vandeman into office over the claims of older members—rolled discredited down the drive.

Yet a ball is the hardest thing in the world to kill; like a lizard, if you break it in two, the head and tail go right on wriggling independently. Also, behind this masked affair at the country club was the business proposition of a lot of blossom festival visitors from all over the state who mustn't be disappointed. By the time I'd finished out in front, getting my prisoner off to the lockup, sending Eddie Hughes, with Capehart and the other helpers he'd picked up to guard the Vandeman bungalow, handed over to the Santa Ysobel police the matter of finding Fong Ling, and turned back to see how Barbara was getting on, the music sounded once more, the rhythmic movement of many feet.

"The boys have got it started again," Jim Edwards joined me in the hall, his tone still lowered and odd from the amazement of the thing. "Curious, that business in there yesterday," a nod indicated the little writing room toward which we moved. "Bronse stepping in, brisk and cool, for you to question him; pleasant, ordinary looking chap. Would you say he had it in his head right then to murder you—or Barbara—if you came too hot on his trail?"

"Me?" I echoed sheepishly. "He never paid me that compliment. He wasn't afraid of me. I think Barbara sealed her own fate, so far as he was concerned, when she let Worth pique her into doing a concentrating stunt at Vandeman's dinner table last night. The man saw that nothing she turned that light on could long stay hidden. He must have decided, then, to put her out of the way. As for his wife—well, however much or little she knew, she'd not defend Barbara Wallace."

At that, Edwards gave me a look, but all he said was,

"Cummings has suffered a complete change of heart, it seems. I left him in the telephone booth, just now, calling up Dykeman. He'll certainly keep the wires hot for Worth."

"He'd better," I agreed; and only Edwards's slight, dark smile answered me.

"There's a side entrance here," he explained mildly, as we came to the turn of the hall. "I'll unlock it; and when Barbara's ready to be taken home, we can get her out without every one gaping at her."

He was still at the lock, his back to me, when a door up front slammed, and a Spanish Cavalier came bustling down the corridor, pulling off a mask to show me Bowman's face, announcing,

"I think you want me in there. That girl should have competent medical attention."

"She has that already," I spoke over my shoulder. "And if she hadn't, do you think she'd let you touch her, Bowman? Man, you've got no human feeling. If you had a shred, you'd know that to her it is as true you tried to take Worth's life with your lying testimony as it is that Vandeman murdered Worth's father with a gun."

"Hah!" the doctor panted at me; he was fairly sober, but still a bit thick in the wits. "You people ain't classing me with this crook Vandeman, are you? You can't do that. No—of course—Laura's set you all against me."

Edwards straightened up from the door. With his first look at that fierce, dark face, the doctor began to back off, finally scuttling around the turn into the main hall at what was little less than a run.

They had Barbara sitting in the big Morris chair while they finished adjusting bandages and garments. Our young cub of a doctor, silver buttoned velveteen coat off, sleeves rolled up, hailed us cheerily,

"That bullet went where it could get the most blood for the least harm, I'd say. Have her all right in a jiffy. At that, if it had been a little further to one side—"

And I knew that Edward Clayte's bullet—Bronson Vandeman's—had narrowly missed Barbara's heart.

"This wonderful girl!" the doctor went on with young enthusiasm, as he bandaged and pinned. "Sitting up there, wounded as she was, and forgetting it, she looked to me more than human. Sort of effect as though light came from her."

"I was ashamed of myself back there in the Square, Mr. Boyne," Barbara's voice, good and strong, cut across his panegyric. "Never in my life did I feel like that before. My brain wasn't functioning normally at all. I was confused, full of indecision." She mentioned that state, so painfully familiar to ordinary humanity, as most people would speak of being raving crazy. "It was agonizing," she smiled a little at the others. "Poor Mr. Boyne helping me along—we'd got somehow into a crowd. And I was just a lump of flesh. I hardly knew where we were. Then suddenly came the sound of the shot, the stinging, burning feeling in my side. It knocked my body down; but my mind came clear; I could use it."

"I'll say you could," I smiled. "From then on, Bill Capehart and I were the lumps of flesh that you heaved around without explanation."

"There wasn't time; and I was afraid you'd find out what had happened to me, and wouldn't bring me here," she said simply. "I knew that the one motive for silencing me was the work I'd been doing for Mr. Boyne."

"Sure," I said, light breaking on me. "And every possible suspect in the Gilbert murder case was under this roof—or supposed to be—the grand march would be the show-down as to that. And just then the clock struck! Poor girl!"

"It was a race against time," Barbara agreed. "If we could get here first, hold the door against who-ever came flying to get in, we'd have the one who shot me."

"But, Barbara child," Laura Bowman was working at a sweater sleeve on the bandaged side. "You did get here and caught Bronson Vandeman; it had worked out all right. Why did you risk sitting up in that strained pose, wounded as you were, to concentrate?"

"For Worth. I had to relate this crime to the one for which he'd been arrested. Within the hour, I'd gathered facts that showed me Edward Clayte killed Worth's father. When I brought that man and his crime to stand before me, and Bronson Vandeman and his crime to stand beside it—as I can bring things when I concentrate on them—I found they dove-tailed—the impossible was true—these two were one man." She looked around at the four of us, wondering at her, and finished, "Can't they take me home now, doctor?"

"Sit and rest a few minutes. Have the door open," the young fellow said. And on the instant there came a call for me from the side entrance.

"Mr. Boyne—are you in there? May I speak to you, please?"

It was Skeet Thornhill's voice. I went out into the entry. There, climbing down from the old Ford truck, leaving its engine running, was Skeet herself. Her glance went first to the door I closed behind me.

"Yes," I answered its question. "She's in there." Then, moved by the frank misery of her eyes, "She'll be all right. Very little hurt."

She said something under her breath; I thought it was "Thank God!" looked about the deserted side entrance, seemed to listen to the flooding of music and movement from the ballroom, then lifting to mine a face so pale that its freckles stood out on it, faltered a step closer and studied me.

"They phoned us," scarcely above a whisper. "Mother sent me for the girls and—Ina. Mr. Boyne," a break in her voice, "am I going to be able to take Ina back with me? Or is she—do they—?"

"Wait," I said. "Here she comes now," as Cummings brought young Mrs. Vandeman toward us. She moved haughtily, head up, a magnificent evening wrap thrown over her costume, and saw her sister without surprise.

"Skeet," she crossed and stood with her back to me, "there's been some trouble here. Keep it from mother if you can. I'm leaving—but we'll get it all fixed up. How did you get here? Can I take you back in the limousine?"

The big, closed car, one of Vandeman's wedding gifts to her, purred slowly up the side drive, circling Skeet's old truck, and stopped a little beyond. Skeet gave it one glance, then reached a twitching hand to catch on the big silken sleeve.

"You can't go to the bungalow, Ina. As I came past, they were placing men around it to—to watch it."

"What!" Ina wheeled on us, looking from one to the other. "Mr. Boyne—Mr. Cummings—who had that done?"

"Does it matter?" I countered. She made me tired.

"Does it matter?" she snapped up my words. "Am I to be treated as if—as though—"

Even Ina Vandeman's effrontery wouldn't carry her to a finish on that. I completed it for her, explicitly,

"Mrs. Vandeman, whether you are detained as an accomplice or merely a material witness, I'm responsible for you. I would have the authority to allow you to go with your sister; but you'll not be permitted to even enter the bungalow."

"It's nearly midnight," she protested. "I have no clothes but this costume. I must go home."

"Oh, come on!" Skeet pleaded. "Don't you see that doesn't do any good, Ina? You can get something at our house to wear."

She gave me a long look, her chin still high, her eyes hard and unreadable. Then, "For the present, I shall go to a hotel." She laid a hand on Skeet's shoulder, but it was only to push her away. "Tell mother," evenly, "that I'll not bring my trouble into her house. Oh—you want Ernestine and Cora? Well, get them and go." And with firm step she walked to her car.

I nodded to Cummings.

"Have one of Dykeman's men pick her up and hang tight," I said, and he smiled back understandingly, with,

"Already done, Boyne. I want to speak to Miss Wallace—if I may. Will you please see for me?"

A moment later, he marched shining and jingling, in through a door that he left open behind him, pulled off his Roman helmet as though it had been a hat, and stood unconsciously fumbling that shoe-brush thing they trim those ancient lids with.

"Barbara," he met the eyes of the girl in the chair unflinchingly, "you told me last night that the only words I ever could speak to you would be in the way of an apology. Will you hear one now? I'm ready to make it. Talk doesn't count much; but I'm going the limit to put Worth Gilbert's release through."

There was a long silence, Barbara looking at him quite unmoved. Behind that steady gaze lay the facts that Worth Gilbert's life and honor had been threatened by this man's course; that she herself was only alive because the bullet of that criminal whom his action unconsciously shielded missed its aim by an inch: Worth's life, her life, their love and all that might mean—and Barbara had eyes you could read—I didn't envy Cummings as he faced her. Finally she said quietly,

"I'll accept your apology, Mr. Cummings, when Worth is free."

CHAPTER XXX

A CONFESSION

IN the dingy office of the city prison, with its sand boxes and barrel stove, its hacked old desks, dusty books and papers, I watched Bronson Vandeman, and wondered to see how the man I had known played in and out across his face with the man Edward Clayte, whom I had tried to imagine, whom nobody could describe.

Helping to recover Clayte's loot for Worth Gilbert looked to the opposition their best bet for squaring themselves. Dykeman from his sick bed, had dug us up a stenographer; Cummings had climbed out of his tin clothes and come along with us to the jail. They wanted the screws put on; but I intended to handle Vandeman in my own way. I had halted the lawyer on the lock-up threshold, with,

"Cummings, I want you to keep still in here. When I'm done with the man, you can question him all you want—if he's left anything to be told." I answered a doubtful look, "Did you see his face there in the ball room as he looked up at Barbara Wallace? He thinks that girl knows everything, like a supreme being. He's still so shaken that he'd spill out anything—everything. He'll hardly suppose he's telling us anything we don't know."

And Vandeman bore out expectations. Now, provided with a raincoat to take the place of his Mandarin robe, his trousers still the lilac satin ones of that costume, he surveyed us and our preparations with a half smile as we settled our stenographer and took chairs ourselves.

"I look like hell—what?" He spoke fast as a man might with a drink ahead. But it was not alcohol that was loosening his tongue. "Why can't some one go up to my place and get me a decent suit of clothes? God knows I've plenty there—closets full of them."

"Time enough when th' Shurff gets here," Roll Winchell, the town marshall grunted at him. "I'm not taking any chances on you, Mr. Vandeman. You'll do me as you are."

"Stick a smoke in my face, Cummings," came next in a voice that twanged like a stretched string. "Damn these bracelets! Light it, can't you? Light it." He puffed eagerly, got to his feet and began walking up and down the room, glancing at us from time to time, raising the manacled hands grotesquely to his cigar, drawing in a breath as though to speak, then shaking his head, grinning a little and walking on. I knew the mood; the moment was coming when he must talk. The necessity to reel out the whole thing to whomever would listen was on him like a sneeze. It's always so at this stage of the game.

For all the hullabaloo in the streets, we were quiet enough here, since the lock-up at Santa Ysobel lurks demurely, as such places are apt to do, in the rear of the building whose garbage can it is. Our pacing captive could keep silent no longer. Shooting a sidelong glance at me, he broke out,

"I'm not a common crook, Boyne, even if I do come of a family of them, and my father's in Sing Sing. I put him there. They'd not have caught him without. He was an educated man—never worked anything but big stuff. At that, what was the best he could do—or any of them? Make a haul, and all they got out of it was a spell of easy money that they only had the chance to spend while they were dodging arrest. Sooner or later every one of them I knew got put away for a longer or shorter term. Growing up like that, getting my education in the public schools daytimes, and having a finish put on it nights with the gang, I decided that I was going to be, not honest, but the hundredth man—the thousandth—who can pull off a big thing and neither have to hide nor go to prison."

This was promising; a little different from the ordinary brag; I signaled inconspicuously to our stenographer to keep right on the job.

"When I was twenty-four years old, I saw my chance to shake the gang and try out my own idea," Clayte rattled it off feelinglessly. "It was a lone hand for me. My father had made a stake by a forgery; checks on the City bank. I knew where the money was hid, eight thousand and seventy nine dollars. It would just about do me. I framed the old man—I told you he was in Sing Sing now—took my working capital and came out here to the Coast. That money had to make me rich for life, respected, comfortable. I figured that my game was as safe as dummy whist."

"Yeh," said Roll Winchell, the marshal, gloomily, "them high-toned Eastern crooks always comin' out here thinkin' they'll find the Coast a soft snap."

"Two years I worked as a messenger for the San Francisco Trust Company," Clayte's voice ran right on past Winchell's interruption, "a model employee, straight as they come; then decided they were too big for me to tackle, and used their recommendation to get a clerk's job with the Van Ness Avenue concern. I was after the theft of at least a half million dollars, with a perfect alibi; and the smaller institution suited my plan. It took me four years to work up to paying teller, but I wasn't hurrying things. I was using my capital now to build that perfect alibi."

He glanced around nervously as the stenographer turned a leaf, then went on,

"I'd picked out this town for the home of the man I was going to be. It suited me, because it was on a branch line of the railway, hardly used at all by men whose business was in the city, and off the main highway of automobile travel; besides, I liked the place—I've always liked it."

"Sure flattered," came the growl as Winchell stirred in his chair.

"My bungalow and grounds cost me four thousand; at that it was a run-down place and I got it cheap. The mahogany—old family pieces that I was supposed to bring in from the East—came high. Yet maybe you'd be surprised how the idea took with me. I used to scrimp and save off my salary at the bank to buy things for the place, to keep up the right scale of living for Bronson Vandeman, traveling agent for eastern manufacturers, not at home much in Santa Ysobel yet, but a man of fine family, rich prospects, and all sorts of a good fellow, settled in the place for the rest of his days."

He turned suddenly and grinned at me.

"You swallowed it whole, Boyne, when you walked into my house last night—the old family furniture I bought in Los Angles, the second-hand library, that family portrait, with a ring on my finger, and the same painted in on what was supposed to be my father's hand."

"Sure," I nodded amiably, "You had me fooled."

"And without a bit of crude make-up or disguise," he rubbed it in. "It was a change of manner and psychology for mine. As Edward Clayte—and that's not my name, either, any more than Vandeman—I was description-proof. I meant to be—and I was. It took—her—the girl," his face darkened and he jerked at his cigar, "to deduce that a nonenity who could get away with nearly a million dollars and leave no trail was some man!"

I raised my head with a start and stared at the man in his raincoat and lilac silk pantaloons.

"That's so," I fed it to him, "She had a name for you. She called you the wonder man."

"Did she!" a pleased smile. "Well, I'll give her right on that. I was some little wonder man. Listen," his insistent over-stimulated voice went eagerly on, "The beauty of my scheme was that up to the very last move, there was nothing criminal in my leading this double life. You see—as I got stronger and stronger here in Santa Ysobel, I bought a good machine, a speedster that could burn up the road. Many's the stag supper I've had with the boys there in my bungalow, and been back behind the wicket as Edward Clayte in the Van Ness Avenue bank on time next morning. I was in that room at the St. Dunstan about as much as a fellow's in his front hall. I walked through it to Henry J. Brundage's room at the Nugget; I stayed there more often than I did at the St. Dunstan, unless I came on here.

"I'd left marriage out. Then that night four years ago when Ina had her little run-in with old Tom Gilbert and got her engagement to Worth smashed, I saw there might be girls right in the class I was trying to break into that would be possible for a man like me. The date for our wedding was set, when Thomas Gilbert remarked to me one afternoon as we were coming off the golf links together, that he was buying a block of Van Ness Savings Bank stock. For a minute I felt like caving in his head, then and there, with the golf club I carried. What a hell of a thing to happen, right at the last this way! Ten chances to one I'd have this man to silence; but it must be done right. Not much room for murder in so full a career as mine—holding down a teller's job, running for the vice presidency of the country club, getting married in style—but every time I'd look up from behind my teller's grille, and see any one near the size of old Gilbert walk in the front door, it gave me the shivers. I'd put more than eight years of planning and hard work into this scheme, and you'll admit, Boyne, that what I had was some alibi. A wedding like that in a town of this size makes a big noise. I managed to be back and forth so much that people got the idea I was hardly out of Santa Ysobel. The Friday night before, I had a stag supper at my house, and Saturday morning if any one had called, Fong Ling would have told them I was sleeping late and couldn't be disturbed. On the forenoon of my wedding day, then, I sat as Edward Clayte in my teller's cage, the suitcase I had carried back and forth empty for so many Saturdays now loaded with currency and securities, not one of which was traceable, and whose amount I believed would run close to a million. It was within three minutes of closing time, when some one rapped on the counter at my wicket, and I looked straight up into the face of old Tom Gilbert.

"I saw a flash of doubtful recognition in his eyes, but didn't dare to avoid them while counting bills and silver to pay his check. If I had done so, he would certainly have known me. As it was, I saw that I convinced him—almost. I watched him as he went out, saw him hesitate a little at the door of Knapp's office—he wasn't quite sure enough. I knew the man. The instant he made certain, he would act.

"The old devil wasn't on terms to attend the reception at the Thornhill place, but I located him in an aisle seat, when I first came from the vestry with my best man. All through the ceremony I felt his eyes boring into my back. When I finally faced him, as Ina and I walked out, man and wife, I knew he recognized me, and almost expected him to step out and denounce me. But no—a fellow leading a double life was all he saw in it; bigamy was the worst he'd suspect me of at the moment. He didn't give Ina much, wouldn't lift a finger to defend her.

"Meantime, the manner of his taking off lay easy to my hand. I'd studied the situation through that skylight, seen Ed Hughes juggle the bolts with his magnets, and mapped the thing out. Gilbert killed there, the room found bolted, was a cinch for suicide. When the reception at the Thornhill house was over, I made an excuse of something needed for the journey, and started across to my bungalow. It was common for all of us to cross through the lawns; I hid in the shrubbery.

"There were people with Gilbert, no chance for me to do anything. I stood there and nearly went out of my hide with impatience over the delays, while he had his row with Worth, when Laura Bowman and Jim Edwards came and braced him to let up on his persecution of them. Mrs. Bowman finally left; he went with her toward the front. Now was my chance; I dodged into the study, jerked his own pistol from its holster, squeezed myself in behind the open door and waited. He came back; I let him get into the room, past me a little, and when at some sound I made, he turned, the muzzle of the gun was shoved against his chest and fired.

"I'd barely finished pressing Gilbert's fingers around the pistol butt when I heard a cry outside, jumped to the door, shut and bolted it just as my mother-in-law ran in across the lawns. I gathered that she'd been there earlier to get those three leaves out of the diary that you were so interested in, Boyne; had just read them and come back to have it out with old Tom. She hung around for five minutes, I should say, beating on the door, calling, asking if anything was wrong.

"My one big mistake in the study was that diary of 1920. It lay open on the desk where he'd been writing. It did tell of his having identified me as Clayte. I'd not expected it, and so I didn't handle it well. Time pressed. I couldn't carry it with me; I tore out the leaf, stuck the book into the drainpipe, and ran.

"And after all," he summed up, "my plans would have gone through on schedule; you never could have touched me with your clumsy, police-detective methods, if it hadn't been for the girl."

He dropped his head and stood brooding a moment, demanded another smoke, got it, shrugged off some thought with a gesture, and finished,

"I was in too deep to turn. It was her life—or mine. Things went contrary. We couldn't get her to come out to the masquerade, where it would have been easy. With those two Mandarin costumes, Fong Ling in my place, I had my time from the hour we put on the masks till midnight. Another perfect alibi. Well—it didn't work. They say you have to shoot a witch with a silver bullet. And she's more than human."

A siren's dry shriek as the Sheriff's gasoline buggy made its way through the crowded street outside. Cummings raised his brows at me, got my nod of permission, and shot his first question at the prisoner.

"Vandeman, where's the money?"

"Not within a hundred miles of here," instantly.

"You took it south with you—on your wedding trip?" Cummings would persist. But our man, so expansive a moment ago, had, as I knew he would at direct mention of his loot, turned sullen, and he started for the San Jose jail, mum as an oyster.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MILLION-DOLLAR SUITCASE

THE Sheriff had gone with his prisoner; Cummings left; and then there came to me, in the street there before the lock-up, riding with Jim Edwards in his roadster, a Worth Gilbert I had never known. Quiet he had been before; but never considerate like this. When I rushed up to him with my triumph and congratulations, and he put them aside, it was with a curious gentleness.

"Yes, yes, Jerry; I know. Vandeman turned out to be Clayte." Then, noticing my bewilderment, "You see, Jim let it slip that Barbara's hurt. Where is she?" And Edwards leaned around to explain.

"When we came past Capehart's, and she wasn't there, I—"

"Oh, that's only a scratch," I hurried to assure the boy. "Barbara'll be all right."

"So Jim said," he agreed soberly. "I'm afraid you're both lying to me."

"All right," I climbed in beside him. "We'll go and see. She's up at your house—waiting for you."

As we headed away for the other end of town, he spoke again, half interrogatively,

"Vandeman shot her?" and when I nodded. "He's on his way to jail. I'm out. But I'm the man that's responsible for what's happened to her. Dragged her into this thing, in the first place. She hated those concentrating stunts; and I set her to do one at that woman's table. To help play my game—I risked her life."

I listened in wonder; sidelong, in the dimness, I studied the carriage of head and shoulders: no diminution of power; but a new use of it. This was not the crude boy who would knock everybody's plans to bits for a whim; Worth had found himself; and what a man!

"How does it look for recovering the money, Boyne?" Edwards questioned as we drove along.

I plunged into the hottest of that stuff Clayte-Vandeman had spilled, talked fascinatingly, as I thought, for three minutes, and paused to hear Worth say,

"Who's with Barbara at my house?"

"Mrs. Bowman," I said in despair, and quit right there.

We came into Broad Street a little above the Vandeman bungalow which lay black and silent, the lights of Worth's house showing beyond. As we turned the corner, a man jumped up from the shadow of the hedge where the Vandeman lawn joined the Gilbert place; there was a flash; the report of a gun; our watchers had flushed some one. I'd barely had time to say so to the others when there was a second sharp crack, then the whine of a ricochetting chunk of lead as it zipped from the asphalt to sing over our heads.

"Beat it!" I yelled. "Stop the car and get to cover!"

Edwards slowed. A moment Worth hung on the running board, peering in the direction of the sounds. I started to climb out after him. There came another shot from up ahead, and then a shout. As I tumbled to my feet in the dark road, Worth had started away on the jump. And I saw then, what I'd missed before, that the man who had burst from the hedge, was running zig-zag down the open roadway toward us. He was making his legs spin, and dodging from side to side as if to duck bullets. Worth headed straight for him, as though it wasn't plain that some one out of sight somewhere was making a target of the runner.

Not the kind of a scrap I care for; in a half light you can't tell friend from foe; but Worth went to it—and what was there to do but follow? I shouted and blew my whistle, hoping our men would hear, heed, and let up shooting. At the moment of my doing so, Worth closed with the man, who dropped something he was carrying, and tackled low, lunging at the boy's knees, aiming I could see to let Worth dive over and scrape up the pavement with his face.

No dodging that tackle; it caught Worth square; he even seemed to spring up for the dive; and somehow he carried his opponent with him to soften the fall. They came down together in the middle of the hard road with the shock of a railway collision; rolled over and over like dogs in a scrap, only there wasn't any growling or yelping. It was deadly quiet; not for an instant could you tell which was which, or whether the whirling, pelting tangle of arms and legs was man, beast or devil. That's why, even when I got near enough, I didn't dare plant a large, thick-soled boot in the mess.

The fight was up to Worth; nothing else for it. Capehart came rolling from the hedge where I had seen the pistols flash; Eddie Hughes, inconceivable in pink puffings, bounded after; Jim Edwards chased up from his car; but all any of us could do was to run up and down as the struggle whirled about, and grunt when the blows landed. These sounded like a pile-driver hitting a redwood butt. Out of the mêlée an arm would jerk, the fist at the end of it come back to land with a thud—on somebody's meat.

"Who the devil is it?" I bellowed at Capehart, as the two grappled, afoot, then down, no knowing who was on top, spinning around in a struggle where neither boots nor knees were barred.

"He sneaked out of the bungalow just now," Capehart snorted. "We'd searched the place. Didn't think there was room for a louse to be hid in it. Got by the boys. I stopped him at the hedge and drove him into the open. Now Worth's got him. That is Worth, ain't it? Fights like him."

"Yes," I said, "It's Worth." But in my own mind I wasn't sure whether Worth had the fugitive, or the fugitive had Worth. And Jim Edwards muttered anxiously, as we skipped and side-stepped along with the fight,

"That fellow may have a knife or a gun."

"Not where he can draw," I said, "or he'd have used it before now." And Capehart sung out,

"Sure. Leave 'em go. Worth'll fix him."

Edging in too close, I got a kick on the shin from a flying heel, and was dancing around on one foot nursing the other when I heard sounds of distress issue from the tangle in the road; somebody was getting breath in long, gaspy sighs that broke off in grunts when the thud of blows fell, and merged in the harsh nasal of blood violently dislodged from nose and throat. For a while they had been up, and swapping punches face to face, lightning swift. Sounds like boxing, perhaps, but there wasn't any science about it. Feint? Parry? Footwork? Not on your life! Each of these two was trying to slug the other into insensibility, working for any old kind of a knock-out.

I began to be a little nervous for fear the boy I was bringing home from jail as a peace offering to Barbara might arrive so defaced that she wouldn't recognize him, when I saw one dark form pull away, leap back, an arm shoot out like a piston-rod, and with a jar that set my own teeth on edge, connect with the other man's chin. He went down clawing the air, crumpled into a bunch of clothes at the side of the road.

"You wanted the Chink, didn't you, Bill?" This was Worth, facing Jim Edwards's torch, fumbling for his handkerchief. "I heard you, and I thought you wanted him."

"It's Fong Ling!" bawled Capehart. "Sure we wanted him—and whatever that was he was carrying. Where is it? Did he drop it?"

"Sort of think he did," Worth was dabbing off his own face with a gingerly, respectful touch. "I know he dropped some teeth back there in the road. Saw him spit 'em out. Maybe he left it with them. You might go and look."

The four of us drifted along the field of battle, Capehart's assistant having taken charge of the unconscious Chinaman, whom he was frisking for weapons. Halfway back to the hedge Bill stumbled on something, picked it up, and dropped it again with a disgusted grunt.

"Nothing but a Chinaboy's keister," he said contemptuously. "Not much to that. Why in blazes did he run so?"

"Because you were shooting him up, I'd say," Jim Edwards suggested.

"Naw. Commenced to run before we turned loose on him," Bill protested.

"Hello!" I had pounced on the unbelievable thing, and called to Edwards for his light. "Worth, here's your eight-hundred-thousand-dollar suitcase!"

"That!" he followed along, dusting himself off, trying out his joints. "Oh, yes. I left it in my closet, and it disappeared. Told you of it at the time, didn't I, Jerry?"

"You did not," I sputtered, down on my knees, working away at the catches. "You never told me anything that would be of any use to us. If this thing disappeared, I suppose Vandeman stole it to get a piece of evidence in the Clayte case out of the way."

"Likely." Worth turned, with no further interest, and started toward his own gate.

"Hi! Come back here," I yelled after him. For the lock gave at that moment; there, under the pale circle of the electric torch, lay Clayte-Vandeman's loot!

"My gosh!" mumbled Capehart. "I didn't suppose there was so much money in the known world."

Eddie Hughes, breathing hard; Jim Edwards, bending to hold the torch; Capehart, stooping, blunt hands spread on knees, goggle-eyed; my own fingers shaking as I dragged out my list and attempted to sort through the stuff—not one of us but felt the thrill of that great fortune tumbled down there in the open road in the empty night.

But Worth delayed reluctantly at the edge of the shadows, looking with impatience across his shoulder, eager to be on—to get to Barbara. Yet I wanted that suitcase to go into the house in his hand; wanted him to be able to tell his girl that she'd made him a winner in the gamble and the long chase. Roughly assured that only a few thousands had been used by Vandeman, I stuck the handles into his fist and trailed along after his quick strides. Edwards followed me. Laura Bowman opened the door to us; she stopped Edwards on the porch.

And then I saw my children meet. I hadn't meant to; but after all, what matter? They didn't know I was on earth. Creation had resolved itself, for them, into the one man, the one woman.

The suitcase thumped unregarded on the floor. She came to him with her hands out. He took them slowly, raised them to his shoulders, and her arms went round his neck.

THE END

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